Promoting Teacher Development through an Interactive Approach to Curriculum Development

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Abstract

This study reports on how the instructor/researcher developed and implemented four courses in close collaboration with undergraduate English majors at the University of Tabriz, Iran. The participants of this study consisted of English language majors (n=251) and language instructors (n=5). The data were collected during one year through semi-structured interviews, discussions with students and instructors, field notes, journals, and diaries. Since no syllabuses were found, the researcher had to develop the curriculum and design the courses based on theory and practice. Therefore, the goals of the courses were agreed upon by the students, their correlations and structures in relation to other courses were established and general classroom and institutional policies were determined. The established syllabus was mediated between students and the researcher. All the measures were taken to render a cohesive syllabus to appeal to the students and lead to an effective learning. It was tried to go beyond content and practice materials in a way to provide opportunities for students’ participation and risk-taking. The content was selected carefully, divided into manageable units, and sequenced based on students’ needs, objectives, wants, and proficiency level. The results of the study imply that syllabus design is provisional, sketchy, interactive and dynamic rather than pre-specified, systematic, and precise. This study may help language teachers to gain a firsthand experience by designing and implementing their own syllabuses.

Keywords: syllabus design; curriculum development; teacher development; curriculum planning and implementation

1. Introduction

This study illustrates how close cooperation between the instructor/researcher and students led to successful results. The present study describes the following four courses which were taught by the instructor/researcher during
two semesters (one year) at the University of Tabriz, Iran: Reading Comprehension, Grammar and Composition, Translation of Simple Texts, and Application of Idioms and Expressions in Translation. In this study, the terms curriculum and syllabus have been used interchangeably. However, as it is known, curriculum is a general concept that involves factors such as theoretical, practical, philosophical, social, and administrative aspects which help the planning of an instructional course. On the other hand, syllabus refers to the content of a course, i.e. what should be taught to the students. The term syllabus is mostly used by the British referring to a specification of what material to be delivered to the students. However, curriculum is preferred by the Americans who use it to mean the whole program of study and learning to be followed by the teacher and students. Curriculum refers to all the process of goal setting, planning, implementation, testing, and evaluation. But syllabus refers to that aspect of course in which content or input is ordered, graded, and sequenced (Nunan, 1999).

2. Syllabus Design and/or Curriculum Development

Generally, syllabus or curriculum deals with the specification of content and the ways in which it is sequenced and delivered. A syllabus is an attempt to provide a focus for what should be selected and studied, along with a rationale for how that content might be graded and ordered. Curriculum or syllabus is a realization of a dynamic system of interrelated factors. It is an on-going process of studying students’ needs (needs analyses), setting of objectives, selecting and adopting appropriate materials, opting for the best methods for teaching and conducting learning activities and exercises (methodology), assessing students (testing), and evaluating the whole course to ensure it has achieved its goals (course evaluation) (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). This process allows language courses to adapt to new situations and conditions, fine-tune themselves, be accountable to internal and external pressures, make use of new findings, and achieve consensus between the students and teachers (Stoller, 2001). A unique model for a curriculum can hardly be found due to different views on language learning and teaching and different instructional settings. Therefore, Tajino, Jamesb, and Kijima (2005) contend that designing a course is quite a complex endeavor and a never-ending cycle. To this end, Brown (1995) emphasizes that any curriculum should be organized around the objectives of the course. It should be noted that designing a course requires a close collaboration of various stakeholders including students, teachers, curriculum planners or advisors, counselors, and administrators. Meanwhile, Lamie (2004) states that parents, vice-principals, and principals can also have an impact on the course. In this regard, Wette (2009) emphasizes the role of the “institutional and cultural contexts” in the curriculum making process. At this juncture, Wette mentions four cornerstones of curriculum: students, syllabus requirements, context, and teacher’s professional knowledge. Meanwhile, there are many other factors which play an important role in the curriculum or syllabus design process such as sequencing, variety, feasibility, and students’ level. Robinson et al. (2001, p. 352) argue that in order to choose a syllabus, it is needed to consider “what is to be taught, and in what sequence.”

In order to design a course, it is needed to consider the following factors: needs analysis (student profile), objectives of the students and course (resources, materials), syllabus type (structural, functional, skill-based, task-based, text-based, content-based, etc.), methodology, assessment, and evaluation (Jordan, 1997). Meanwhile, Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 3) include the following factors in their model of curriculum design process: needs, principles, goals, content and sequencing, format and presentation, monitoring and assessing, and evaluation. As Bourke (2006) argues, every syllabus should consider principles of language learning and teaching and take into account contextual variables and constraints because a syllabus is more than an inventory of what should be taught. Lamie (2004, p. 124) mentions six features which may affect an individual’s response to a curriculum: “personal attributes (confidence and attitudes), practical constraints (textbooks, class size, school type, and examination structures), external influences (the nation, the community and the school), awareness, training and feedback.” It should be noted that syllabus design, planning, implementation, and evaluation is a slow process due to various extraneous influences. In order to design a syllabus, it is needed to consider an institution’s goals, options, limitations, and students’ expectations and language proficiency levels.
The aim of a syllabus is to chunk language knowledge into manageable units in order to ease the process of language learning and teaching (Hutchinson & Waters). Robinson (1991) lists three types of syllabuses: A, B, and C. Type A deals with language forms and is referred to as structural-analytic syllabus, type B is related to notional-functional and is called functional-analytic syllabus, and type C is concerned with process and is known as non-analytic syllabus. Robinson contends that based on lesson units, the focus may be on type A, B, or C. The point is that each course in general and lesson unit in particular requires its particular syllabus type. It is the teacher who decides based on the students’ goals on an appropriate syllabus type. That is, the pertinent type of syllabus, whether A, B, or C, is determined according to the goals of the learners and the course. Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2001) propose synthetic and analytic syllabuses. They believe that the synthetic syllabus breaks language down into specific elements such as vocabulary, grammar, macro skills of reading or writing, and/or language functions. These elements are presented one by one in a linear order, from more important to less important, and from easy to difficult. It is the learner who synthesizes and puts language parts together. However, in an analytic syllabus, the language is not divided up and is presented holistically in order to use and produce language communicatively.

3. The Study

This study is an account of personal experience of the researcher/instructor which was obtained during two consecutive semesters. During these two semesters, the researcher/instructor was assigned to teach the following four courses: Reading Comprehension, Grammar and Composition, Translation of Simple Texts, and Application of Idioms and Expressions in Translation. As an instructor, the researcher/instructor had to teach these courses to the undergraduate English majors at the University of Tabriz, Iran. In Iran students have to compete with each other in order to enter a state university, so they have to take a university entrance examination held every year. To enter the state universities, which are mostly high ranking, the students have to study hard and compete with lots of other students. For this reason, the English majors who have been accepted to the university of Tabriz, where the study took place and in which the instructor is the full-time staff, are very competent and have a high proficiency level. It is because most of the students attend private institutes in order to enrich themselves and pass the university entrance examination. Therefore, the researcher/instructor had to select advanced materials, especially textbooks, and think of appropriate ways of devising classroom activities and exercises. Since at the University of Tabriz and especially at our department there were no syllabuses to guide the instructors, the researcher/instructor had to design syllabuses for the above-mentioned four courses. The norm at our department is that the instructors teach the courses based on their title without having any guidelines. Obviously, an ideal syllabus should include the following information which we lack at our department: title page, table of contents, instructor information, letter to the students, purpose of the course, course description, course and unit objectives, resources, readings, course calendar, course requirements, evaluation, grading procedures, how to use the syllabus, how to study for this course, content information, and learning tools. Generally, there are about 60 to 65 students in each class in our department. In the first semester, the researcher/instructor taught the Reading Comprehension and Translation of Simple Texts and in the second semester Grammar and Composition and Application of Idioms and Expressions in Translation. The data were collected through discussion with random selection of students and all the instructors. Meanwhile, in order to obtain continuous feedback from the students, the researcher/instructor obtained their views before the beginning of the course, during the program, and even after the final exams. The reason that the researcher/instructor sought the views of other instructors was that they had already taught these courses and had wide experience with them. “A considerable amount of time and energy can be saved if we learn from these examples, by looking at the decisions other course designers made and at the materials they selected, and then adapt these other approaches to match the particular parameters to our own situation” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 2000, p. 154).

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of undergraduate English language majors (n=251) and language instructors (n=5) at the department of English language, in the city of Tabriz, Iran. The students comprised four classes: Reading Comprehension (n=61), Translation of Simple Texts (n=63), Grammar and Composition (n=65),
and Application of Idioms and Expressions in Translation (n=62). The students’ ages ranged from 19 to 26 with an average of 22. During the study they were at the third semester and had other course in addition to the above-mentioned courses. The instructors comprised five TEFL graduates with an average of five years of teaching English language at our department.

4.2. Instruments

The means that were used in this study to collect the necessary data consisted of semi-structured interview, discussions with students and instructors, field notes, journals, and diaries.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected in two semesters (one year). Each evening, the researcher/instructor noted down the type of activities that were carried out in the classes and wrote the students’ reactions to them. Meanwhile, the researcher/instructor strived to approach the five instructors who had already taught these four courses and obtain enough feedback from them and enrich his teaching ability and enhance classroom activities. Due to the instructors’ time limitation, the researcher/instructor barely interviewed them formally. Rather, every opportunity was taken to talk to them whenever and wherever possible. As the data were qualitative, they were analyzed thematically and interactively in order to find patterns and themes. The findings of this study will be presented in two separate sections namely Curriculum Planning and Curriculum Implementation.

4.4. Curriculum planning

The important issue for researcher/instructor was to reach agreement with the students on the first day of the class. Before the start of the classes, the researcher/instructor reached some of the students who had taken these four courses with him. In this way, he tried to inquire into their overall goals, needs, preferences, and expectations. It was at this stage that the researcher/instructor attempted to choose an appropriate textbook and develop some necessary handouts. Meanwhile, on the first day of the class, the researcher/instructor asked students’ opinions and expectations; in this way he involved them and encouraged their participation in the classroom activities. At the planning stage, the researcher/instructor did not attempt to teach anything, but rather invited the students to discuss the selected textbook, classroom activities, projects, homework, testing procedures, absenteeism, classroom attendance, and grading procedures. By laying down rules and principles, a systematic order was created and the students tried to do their best, study hard, and ultimately achieve their language learning goals. It should be noted that the first days of classes were very important because some of the students were concerned about choosing a useful textbook, some were quite worried about their final grade, some were anxious about the final exam, and some were curious about the type of activities that were supposed to be performed in the class. In the planning stage, before the commencement of the courses, the students and the researcher/instructor figured out the content, classroom activities and exercises, students’ goals, wishes, and interests, and testing procedure. It was also necessarily tried to deal with various constraints and compensated for the lack of resources and facilities. Generally, the undergraduate classes were large (50 to 65 students) and it was necessary to devise some ways of keeping all the students engaged in order to manage them. However, Wette (2009, p. 339) argues that “all plans [are] as highly provisional and readily modifiable during implementation.” On the other hand, Bourke (2006, p. 279) believes that “one needs overall goals within which specific outcomes or objectives can be set.” To overcome the problems faced in the initial stages of planning, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 21) suggest composing different types of questions. By answering these questions, the teachers can find solutions to their classroom problems. Therefore, they contend that “Some of these questions will be answered by research, others will rely more on the intuition and experience of the teacher; yet others will call on theoretical models.” It should be noted that by designing the four courses, the researcher/instructor could find more affinity with them and meet the students’ needs, goals, and expectations. Meanwhile, the researcher/instructor negotiated with the students about every aspect of the four courses such as material selection, learning activities and exercises, and goals and objectives. In a negotiated
curriculum, teachers and students focus on “language learning processes … as the course progresses” (Wette, 2009, p 339). The mutual understanding can “encourage classroom participation and positively affect student motivation” (Tajino et al., 2005, p. 40). Cotterall (2000, p. 110) states that during course design process, five principles may emerge which relate to “(1) learner goals, (2) the language learning process, (3) tasks, (4) learner strategies, and (5) reflection on learning.” However, Nunan (1999, p. 172) notes that the relationship between planning, teaching and learning is complex and “The notion that there is a simple equation between these three components of the curriculum is naive, simplistic, and misleading.”

4.5. Curriculum implantation

In order to encourage students to participate more actively in executing activities and exercises, the researcher/instructor used the methods and techniques that were interesting and learner-friendly. Therefore, to implement the Grammar and Comprehension course (3), the researcher/instructor did not teach the grammar points by himself. The students and the researcher/instructor had already agreed upon a grammar textbook (Advanced Grammar in Use by Martin Hewings), so the researcher/instructor asked the students to teach the grammar points. Therefore, every session five students were assigned to prepare themselves at home, and when they came to class, one by one they came to the front of the class and explained the grammatical structures. Meanwhile, the researcher/instructor asked the students to compose a one page composition about the grammar points that they studied. Writing a composition not only enriched their grammatical competence but also activated their communicative performance. The topics for composition were chosen each week which were proposed either by students or the researcher/instructor. The students were rather advanced because they had already taken and passed Grammar and Composition courses (1) and (2). For this reason, the researcher/instructor did not do teacher-fronted type of delivering grammar because he knew that this would bore students. Meanwhile, as far as the class time allowed us, the researcher/instructor called upon the students to read their compositions to their classmates. Sometimes, the topics were interesting and instigated lively debate among the students. More importantly, when the students took responsibility for teaching grammar, their self-confidence soared tremendously and they felt they were in control of the classroom activities and exercises. During the first weeks of the courses, teaching and explaining grammar points were a little challenging and daunting for some of the students. However, little by little they became more motivated and enjoyed it because it was they who conducted the classroom activities and exercises and were in charge of teaching and learning.

For the Reading Comprehension, the researcher/instructor had introduced a textbook (Mosaic 2: Reading, by Wegmann & Knezevic, 2002) which was studied. The students usually studied each unit at home before coming to class. So in class, the students and the researcher/instructor discussed the passages and their exercises, clarified the difficult words, and talked about the ambiguous sentences and paragraphs. Then, after grasping the texts, we proceeded by doing exercises. The textbook that was used was rather a new book which interested most of the students. Sometimes, in order to make classes more lively and learner-centered, the researcher/instructor asked volunteer students to do the teaching. That is, the students who were advanced undertook the responsibility for presenting the units: asking their classmates to read the texts or carry out the exercises. Some of the students truly enjoyed the experience of conducting the classes because they intended to become teacher or lecturer in the future.

Meanwhile, the other students felt relaxed when they saw that their classmates were in charge of teaching. The atmosphere that was established was indeed learning-based and the researcher/instructor’s role was to organize the activities, encourage more student participation, and orchestrate the implementation of tasks. The students never felt that the researcher/instructor controlled their behavior; rather they saw that they were acquiring language based on their own styles, strategies, and preferences. Meanwhile, nearly in the middle of the semester, the researcher/instructor began to introduce and present some handouts besides using the textbook. It was because the students had already taken and passed three Reading courses and were studying Reading Comprehension at the time of this research. So they were quite apt and competent in reading. Therefore, the researcher/instructor decided to find some challenging reading texts in order to encourage their participation and involvement in the classroom.
activities. Later, when the researcher/instructor talked to them, they expressed their satisfaction with these types of reading passages.

For the third course, Application of Idioms & Expressions in Translation, the researcher/instructor selected a textbook which was interesting, simple, and comprehensive (Idioms Organizer, by Jon Wright, 1999). Of course, there were numerous books at the market, but the researcher/instructor opted for the one that was useful and user-friendly. Nevertheless, there was no syllabus for any of the courses that were studied. Therefore, the researcher/instructor made use of any means and resources to augment the learning process and encourage student participation. By studying the Application of Idioms & Expressions in Translation course, the students were able to learn English idioms and expressions and apply this knowledge in translating Persian counterparts. Since the selected textbook was rather comprehensive (200 units), every session five units were studied during one semester which consisted of 17 weeks. In order to make the course more interesting and provide opportunities for learning, the researcher/instructor asked the students to study the units at home and come to class prepared. Therefore, the students were called on to come to the front of the class one by one and teach idioms to their classmates. This course was interesting because the students had to find equivalent idioms and expressions in Persian language. When one of the students introduced the English idioms and expressions to the other students, they had to tell their Persian counterparts. In this way, the students were motivated to take part in the informal discussions which enhanced their oral performance too. The researcher/instructor rarely dominated the classes and it was mostly the students who gave presentations and controlled the classes. The researcher/instructor’s job was to encourage students to learn more language. This course was very appealing to the students because it contained interesting idioms and expressions in English which was new for them.

For the fourth course, Translation of Simple Texts, the researcher/instructor did not select and introduce a textbook. Rather, he had compiled various types of texts including English and Persian. These texts were related to different general topics such as: health, sports, education, global warming, water shortage, food, etc. The reason that a textbook was not chosen was that there was not a useful book and more importantly the researcher/instructor did not want to confine the students to a set book. It was supposed to translate not only English texts into Persian but also Persian passages into English. So the researcher/instructor could not find any useful textbook containing both types of texts. To implement this course, every week a one page text was translated from English to Persian and vice versa. The students were asked to translate the selected texts at home and bring them for discussion to the class. In the class, the students read their translations one by one and the difficult points were discussed and the best equivalents either for English or the Persian were chosen. The atmosphere of the class was in a way that the students never felt the researcher/instructor controlled them or imposed his own translation. Rather, the class environment was inviting and the best works which were translated by the students were endorsed by all the students. Sometimes, the errors which were made were corrected by the other students rather than just by the researcher/instructor.

5. Findings

The findings of this study will be presented in two separate sections namely Curriculum Planning and Curriculum Implementation.

5.1. Curriculum planning

The important issue for researcher/instructor was to reach agreement with the students on the first day of the class. Before the start of the classes, the researcher/instructor reached some of the students who had taken these four courses with him. In this way, he tried to inquire into their overall goals, needs, preferences, and expectations. It was at this stage that the researcher/instructor attempted to choose an appropriate textbook and develop some necessary handouts. Meanwhile, on the first day of the class, the researcher/instructor asked students’ opinions and expectations, in this way he involved them and encouraged their participation in the classroom activities. At the planning stage, the researcher/instructor did not attempt to teach anything, but rather invited the students to discuss the selected textbook, classroom activities, projects, homework, testing procedures, absenteeism, classroom
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In the planning stage, the researcher/instructor took into account various variables such as: cultural restrictions on materials, class size, time factor, availability of books and equipment, societal attitudes, selection and organization of content, students’ aims, attitudes, expectations, and proficiency level. Also, the researcher/instructor took into consideration “three general procedures: initiation, implementation, and continuation” (Lamie, 2004, p. 122). However, the researcher/instructor also wanted to ensure that all these processes would lead to appropriate outcomes. Although as teachers we might design our own syllabuses, it should be remembered that students “have their own hidden agendas” (Nunan, 1999, p. 141). Nunan believes that “these hidden agendas determine output from the learners’ perspective regardless of input.” Therefore, as a teacher, the researcher/instructor explained the objectives of the planned curriculum thoroughly to the students and discussed with them about it.

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also Persian passages into English. So the researcher/instructor could not find any useful textbook containing both types of texts. To implement this course, every week a one page text was translated from English to Persian and vice versa. The students were asked to translate the selected texts at home and bring them for discussion to the class. In the class, the students read their translations one by one and the difficult points were discussed and the best equivalents either for English or the Persian were chosen. The atmosphere of the class was in a way that the students never felt the researcher/instructor controlled them or imposed his own translation. Rather, the class environment was inviting and the best works which were translated by the students were endorsed by all the students. Sometimes, the errors which were made were corrected by the other students rather than just by the researcher/instructor.

5. Discussion

The above-mentioned four courses imply that an eclectic approach was adopted in presenting and practicing the materials and classroom activities. As a teacher, the researcher/instructor trusted his experience in order to establish a lively and interesting classroom environment. Clearly, there are behaviorist, cognitive, and affective aspects of language teaching. Therefore, a practitioner “may choose a behaviorist approach to the teaching of pronunciation, a cognitive approach to the teaching of grammar, and use affective criteria in selecting … texts” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 51). Evidently, the important issues for the researcher/instructor in this teaching-learning situation were the pair/group work and the types of activities such as tasks, projects, problem-solving tasks, and communicative activities. Presenting just content in isolation cannot contribute to language learning, i.e. language acquisition is more than presentation and practice of isolated items one at a time. To motivate the students to attend to the presented materials, the syllabuses were made more dynamic, using interesting and thought provoking methods and techniques. That is, the materials and methods complemented each other in order to arouse students’ involvement in pair/group work and in doing activities and exercises. The syllabuses were organized in a way to inform them of the materials and methods. The syllabuses were not fixed, rather they were flexible and changeable based on the pace of the classrooms, students’ level, needs, objectives, and interests. The syllabuses did not restrict the researcher/instructor’s creativity, rather they acted as a guideline to support classroom innovations. The innovative syllabuses established links with local and target needs and objectives. They struck a balance between methods and materials and fulfilled students’ immediate and future needs. To this end, the researcher/instructor mediated between the syllabuses and students. As Lamie (2004, p. 126) notes, “without a change in teacher attitude, there will be no significant change in the curriculum.” When the researcher/instructor first entered the profession of teaching, he thought that exposing students to interesting and stimulating materials would suffice to persuade them to attend to language and learn it. However, later he realized that the important thing for most of the students was to build a mutual and robust relationship between other students and their teacher. Therefore, affect plays an important role in the design of a course. As a result, Davies (2006, p. 8) states that he “began to regard early classes with a more affective eye and … promote affective factors such as good classroom participant relations.” More importantly, as a teacher, the researcher/instructor needed to convert “generalized course objectives into specific classroom activities and tasks” (Wette, 2009, p. 350). In order to enhance language acquisition, the researcher/instructor provided an optimal learning condition and atmosphere such as focus both on form and meaning, comprehensible input and output, a stress-free environment, and copious interaction. Also, the researcher/instructor used every opportunity to praise students’ work, appraise their progress, support their motivation, maintain their involvement, manage the classroom, deal with different types of students, and monitor their works. To create a classroom environment that could augment learning opportunities, the researcher/instructor used different types of methodological options, managed to cope with constraints and limitations, obtained mastery of the subject matter, trusted and relied on his immediate thinking and decision-making, developed flexibility in facing problems, and used every means to motivate students for participation in doing activities and exercises.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study illustrates that teachers can gain a lot from designing a syllabus. It is through curriculum development that teachers can add to their theory and practice. They can become more than consumers of other designers’ works
and instead become skillful and able in developing their own curriculum. The decision as to what syllabus or syllabuses to employ will depend on a number of factors such as students’ goals and needs, the course’s objectives, the overall aims of the institution, availability of resources, community and social expectations, and teacher’s ability and skill in adopting and implementing a viable syllabus. An expert teacher would not jettison past syllabuses rather he/she would “try to find what is most suitable for a particular situation” (Robinson, 1999, p. 40). As a teacher, one needs to integrate several syllabuses in order to provide an optimal learning environment to motivate students to participate in doing activities and tasks both inside and outside the classroom. Mainly, it will depend on the nature of the course what type of syllabus to opt for. Some courses require structural, phonological, lexical, or a situational syllabus. Yet others might prefer functional, notional, topical, task-based, text-based, content-based, or a skill-based syllabus. However, “one of the secrets of success is planning sufficiently ahead. Later, compromise and flexibility may well be needed” (Jordan, 1997, p. 65). Clearly, any curriculum needs some change in order to appeal to both students and teachers. However, the process of change is rather demanding and challenging. Therefore, any curriculum change and innovation involves personal, professional, institutional, social, national, and educational matters. “It challenges the very fabric of our society, and our roles not only as professionals, but as people” (Lamie, 2004, p. 115). In a smaller scale, if it is yearned to bring about any changes, it is needed to carry out action research, “consider context-specific issues … and to set up appropriate systems to guide curriculum revisions” (Watson Todd, 2006, p. 1). It should be noted that curriculum development contributes to teacher development. That is, curriculum development will take place “if teachers themselves become the principal agents of curriculum change through critical analysis and reflection on their current performance” (Nunan, 1999, p. 14). Therefore, teachers should be provided with more opportunities “to have more time for training and refreshment” (Lamie, 2004, p. 132). In this way, they can be able to make a curriculum in which the students can benefit from “practice, continuity, balance, variety and relevance” (Wette, 2009, pp. 355-6).

It goes without saying that this study can be useful to curriculum developers, syllabus designers, teachers, experts and researchers in the field of course or program design.

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