The challenge of developing and maintaining curriculum innovation at higher education

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Received October 7; revised December 23; accepted January 5

Abstract

This paper describes a curriculum renewal project developed for adult learners of English that resulted in a more dynamic and effective program at a Turkish university. A multi-dimensional needs analysis was initiated to investigate the current situation across the three English-medium departments of the university as regards students’ English language requirements and their academic needs, and the language needs of the students receiving an English for Academic Purposes curriculum. Survey findings brought about the need to introduce five major innovative changes into the current curriculum. These curricular innovations are followed by the monitoring and evaluation of the new curriculum.

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Keywords: Curriculum renewal; curriculum innovation; multidimensional needs assessment; English for academic purposes (EAP)

1. Introduction

Curriculum renewal process is a dynamic system of interrelated elements, comprising needs analysis, setting of goals and objectives, implementing and evaluating the program (Richards, 2001). The benefits of periodically evaluating and revising existing curricula are widely acknowledged (Jackson, 2005) to ensure that the needs of learners are adequately addressed. An English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum should therefore be subjected to ongoing renewal if it were to remain dynamic and be more responsive to the present and future needs of the students.

In Turkish Higher Education, several universities offer English-medium instruction. Çukurova University, the site of the present study, introduced English-medium education (EME) in 1983 in the Departments of Economics and the Business Administration (EBA). This was followed by the Mechanical Engineering (ME) and Electrics-Electronics Engineering (EEE) departments of the Engineering Faculty. The Center for Foreign Languages (CFL) was established to provide a one-year intensive EAP curriculum with the aim of preparing students to function as efficient members of their respective English-medium departments, which will require them to read specialized...
professional literature, follow lectures and hold discussions in L2. Figure 1 illustrates the EAP curriculum before the curriculum renewal process.

![Diagram of the EAP Curriculum](image)

As seen in the Figure, the curriculum has three levels: Level 1 the lowest, Level 3 the highest. The teaching year is divided into four 8-week teaching blocks. The core course offers language learning opportunities, using a series of course books, supported by additional teaching materials. Weekly teaching schedule consists of 21 hours for all levels. Language skills are integrated and taught as part of the core course, following an integrated skills program. Video, computer lab, and self-access are additional components of the curriculum.

The CFL’s curriculum was originally based on research studies addressed specifically to meet the university’s needs; however, over the years the curriculum failed to meet the present and future academic requirements of the students. This resulting mismatch between the students’ academic needs and what was taught in CFL, along with informal faculty concerns about the difficulty many students were having in coping successfully with the requirements of their English-medium departments caused low morale among many students. The underlying reasons for initiating the present curriculum renewal process was to better meet the needs of the students, and to raise the standards of the EFL classes in order to achieve a more dynamic curriculum. This paper illustrates the challenges that resulted in a successful outcome of the curriculum renewal process. It also provides a useful framework that would guide curriculum designers in their efforts to promote successful innovation as part of the curriculum renewal process.

2. The Process of Curriculum Renewal

The curriculum renewal process was adopted from Richards (2001), comprising a dynamic system of five interrelated elements; needs analysis, setting of goals and objectives, implementing and evaluating of the program.

2.1. Needs Assessment

A multi-dimensional needs assessment has been initiated in order to evaluate the existing curriculum and to obtain a wider range of input concerning the present and future needs of students from multiple perspectives; administration, EAP teachers, current and former students and subject-instructors to enable making informed judgements on the specification of goals and objectives of the new curriculum so that what is taught at EAP program matches the students’ needs as closely as possible (Long & Crookes, 1992). Data were collected from the five sources of informants \( n=1000 \) employing mainly questionnaires and interviews.
2.1. Present situation analysis

The present situation analysis (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) was conducted with all students registered to EAP program (n=650). The students completed an end-of-semester written curriculum evaluation, which aimed to find out their perceptions of their own language needs and wants, and the effectiveness of the curriculum in relation to its goals and objectives. Besides, the researcher, who was also the administrator, conducted focus interviews with a group of 82 students who were about to complete the EAP program of the CFL to find out what aspects of the curriculum students like most and what aspects of the curriculum students think should be changed.

2.2. Target-situation analysis

The third group of informants included past EAP students who had already completed one-year of the English program at the CFL and were pursuing their academic studies in their respective English-medium departments. A target-situation analysis was conducted with these past-EAP students to obtain a description of the tasks the students were required to carry out in their university content courses, and their perceived effectiveness in fulfilling those tasks using a survey questionnaire. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer students (N=120) across the three English-medium departments of the university. Students were asked to make a formal critique of the EAP curriculum and offer suggestions for the curriculum renewal process. Additionally, subject instructors (N=15), teaching content courses were interviewed to find out their opinions concerning students’ performance in relation to course requirements, and offer suggestions for the curriculum renewal process.

Data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively through a process of pattern-coding to find the recurrent themes. Data from the 220 completed questionnaires were analyzed through the computation of descriptive statistics.

3. Findings of the Needs Analysis

Findings from the needs analysis indicated that the current EAP curriculum remained inadequate in meeting students’ academic needs. Survey findings offered significant implications for redesigning the EAP curriculum content, and were used as the basis for meaningful curricular change; there was a need to introduce five major innovative changes into the EAP curriculum: The need for more challenging instructional materials; demand for more productive learning, particularly in speaking; the need for more challenging out-of-class tasks, which would give the students more autonomy; the need for content-based materials that would familiarize students with subject-specific English, finally the need to redesign the EAP curriculum in such a way that it would enable exit students overcome enculturation difficulties they experience in adjusting to their English-medium departments.

Identification of the abovementioned problems helped me, as the researcher and administrator of the CFL to initiate curriculum innovation and “serve as a catalyst for change and innovation” (Stoller, 1997:33) in order to better respond to learners’ demands.

4. Initiating Curriculum Renewal Process

The first step in revising the curriculum involved translating the findings of needs assessment into a mission statement encoding curriculum goals and objectives. An ownership model was adopted in which the entire EAP teaching staff (n=60) were given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process in curriculum design to achieve a more effective program (Brown, 1995). A three-day orientation seminar was organized to introduce teachers to the principles on which the new curriculum would be based; to encourage teachers to establish goals and objectives; and introduce teachers to proposed innovations in the hope this would increase their commitment to making the changes happen.

As part of this seminar, teachers, in small focus groups, negotiated how English should be used in the students’ respective departments and with joint participatory decision-making, teachers unanimously reached an operational definition of the ‘mission statement.’ Teachers, then, participated in the process of designing goals and objectives, based on their classroom experience, and what they thought students needed to achieve in a one-year period in the CFL. Since the curriculum promoted skills-based learning, objectives were specified in four macro skill areas (reading, writing, listening and speaking), each followed by a list of micro skills. The draft curriculum document
was revised and then turned into a coherent statement of mission, goals and objectives, providing an exact characterization of the target proficiency (Johnson, 1989).

To achieve coherence in the curriculum renewal process, findings from the needs analysis with regard to students’ and departmental lecturers’ expectations were also taken into account. For this purpose, the extent to which the aims identified by the subject lecturers coincided with those of the CFL teachers was checked. Those that had been left unstated by the CFL teachers were added to the goal statements. For example, the survey identified answering exam questions and report writing as frequently required tasks in students’ content classes: these were added to the objectives to better respond to real-world language demands of students.

In the curriculum renewal process, the next step involved changing course books with those following task-based philosophy that would correspond to learners’ needs and match the goals and objectives of the new curriculum. Another innovation of the revised curriculum was the introduction of portfolio for testing and assessment component of the curriculum. Portfolio was intended to be used not only for assessing student performance and promoting student autonomy, but also for enhancing their productive language and help students track their language skills development. The needs assessment findings showed that students demand to see the immediate relevance of their studies in the CFL to their academic content-based needs. This realization provided the language program with the impetus to initiate an “EAP materials development project” to produce content-based materials and develop instructional tasks in a specific disciplinary discourse, e.g. Economics. These materials were piloted, and necessary modifications were made to be used in the program. Finally, the need for familiarity with authentic lectures led to the incorporation of a “class visitation project,” which required students to attend an ‘introductory lecture’ in their intended academic department. Alternatively, lecturers were invited from the students’ academic departments to deliver an introductory lecture in the second semester of the Academic Year. The renewed curriculum is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the Core course, still considered central, offers students systematic 21-hour/week language learning opportunities, using basic course books following an Integrated Skills and task based philosophy. In the renewed curriculum, student of all levels are introduced to “Introductory Lectures”, and “Content-based EAP Materials” relevant to their future academic areas in the second semester. Portfolio is integrated in the curriculum from the beginning. The Computer lab, video and self-access were also innovated not only to reinforce the skills, tasks and strategies introduced in the core class, but also to emphasize the use of computers for information searches, such that students may access either specific Internet sites or are instructed from a CD.
4.2. Monitoring Curriculum Renewal

The next step of the curriculum renewal process is the development of a system for regular monitoring. Johnson (1989:12) states that achieving and maintaining coherence requires the active engagement and co-operation of all the participants throughout the life of a curriculum. Communication among the teaching staff and different units was achieved through having regular weekly meetings with them. These meetings also served to get planned curriculum changes running smoothly by maintaining constant feedback, to monitor teachers’ staying on course in meeting curriculum goals and objectives, and enabling them to accommodate innovation in their teaching practices, achieve coherence, in other words, as stated by Johnson (1989) demonstrate that the ends specification matched the institution’s policy, and that means and ends are compatible.

4.3. Evaluation of the Revised Curriculum

A summative evaluation of the curriculum renewal was obtained by eliciting the perceptions of teachers and students. Five months after the full implementation of the project, to obtain teachers’ perceptions of the curriculum renewal process, I held semi-structured interviews with individual teachers, each lasting 15-20 minutes. Content analysis of interview data revealed that teachers’ perceptions of the orientation program and their involvement in the curriculum renewal process were extremely positive.

Regarding the new course books teachers agreed that the new course books appropriately promoted students’ communicative skills and met institutional needs. With regard to the implementation of portfolio assessment, teachers acknowledged the powerful role of our portfolio innovation in promoting student autonomy and agreed that, compared to previous years, students were developing better and more productive writing skills, the intended outcome of our shift in methodology. Students’ perceptions of the implementation of portfolios gathered through a questionnaire indicated that students had improved their writing skills, followed by vocabulary building and reading, and that they could trace their own growth. Portfolio assessment filled a missing component in the curriculum.

To evaluate whether the EAP project and student in-class visits had achieved their intended aims, I held focus group interviews with students across the three English-medium faculties. Students reported that they the project’ provided a bridge between the CFL and their respective departments.

Conclusion

This paper addressed a two-year curriculum renewal project in Turkish Higher Education. The curriculum renewal process reported in this study was found to be effective and dynamic - because it is based on student and faculty needs, with a commitment to multi-dimensional needs analyses, developed in light of the current research related to curriculum design, systematic program evaluation, participatory decision making by the EAP teaching staff, and continuous feedback mechanism incorporated into the system.

Based on the experience gained, several suggestions are offered to guide curriculum designers in their efforts to promote curriculum innovation. First, innovation needs to be introduced gradually in a systematic manner, developed under the light of theoretical issues. Second, all participants need to be involved in decision making with maximum provision for the development of consensus, commitment and motivation. Third, effective administrative engagement and support are needed for the development of a foreign language curriculum to achieve coherence among its components. Teachers, as key players, need to be provided with adequate administrative support not only during the earlier stages of the curriculum renewal process, but also throughout the following teaching periods to enable changes to be implemented in their teaching practice. Finally, efficient internal communication needs to be maintained with potential adopters of innovation to facilitate acceptance of change.

Although the actual needs of learners might vary from country to country, the applied procedures and approach of needs analysis, curriculum evaluation, introducing and managing innovation should have much wider implications for EAP and serve as a model for other institutions in and outside Turkey.
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