CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO – MODERN LANGUAGES – PRACTICE, PROBLEMS, PROBABILITY – PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Curriculum development can take the form of improvement of the existing curriculum, for example by extending its scope, or can mean fundamental changes in the organization and content of the curriculum. In discussing these two aspects of curriculum development, Beddoe¹ points out that curriculum change implies changing goals and means, as well as the individuals who are to implement the changes.

This is as true of Modern Languages as of any other area of the curriculum. During the development of secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago, this paper suggests that in the light of the distinction above, improvements have taken place in the curriculum within the sphere of Modern Languages but that fundamental change has not taken place although the need for such change is urgent. In the following discussion 'curriculum' is taken to mean

"a statement of aims and of specific objectives; it indicates some selection and organization of content; it either implies or manifests certain patterns of learning and teaching, whether because the objectives demand them or because the content organization requires them. Finally it includes a program evaluation of the outcomes²."

Modern Languages have been considered an important part of
the Secondary school curriculum in Trinidad and Tobago since the establishment of these schools during the nineteenth century. The curriculum of the first government-established school, Queen's Collegiate, was designed in the tradition of that of the British public school which offered a classical education based on a thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek. Yet other disciplines were not neglected and the Modern Languages were represented in the curriculum by French with the possibility of German being introduced later. Queen’s Collegiate was intended to be a superior educational institution designed to produce educated men to fill the most important posts in the Public Service.\(^3\) Knowledge of a language was considered an indispensible part of a sound education, an intellectual discipline giving the student access to a body of literature, a familiarity with which was considered the hallmark of the truly educated man.

The inclusion of modern languages in the secondary school curriculum, however, was not only for the intellectual benefits provided. Some citizens felt that a classical education was irrelevant for students who would be taking up employment in agriculture and commerce, and they advocated a more practical curriculum. Modern Languages were included on utilitarian grounds, since in the mid-nineteenth century more than two-thirds of the population of Trinidad spoke either Spanish or French; knowledge of these languages, as well as English, was seen to be useful to “young men in this mixed community.”\(^4\)

Thus Modern Languages enjoyed a certain importance within the curriculum, an importance related in some measure to the pre-eminence of the classical languages, which greatly influenced all language teaching. The classically based approach to teaching the Modern Languages has been termed a ‘grammatical’ one, because it stressed the presentation of discrete grammatical points and paradigms; the goal was a thorough knowledge of the grammatical structures, and to achieve this, emphasis was placed on translation exercises and the study of literary texts. This grammatically-based approach to foreign language learning prevailed in the secondary schools with the consequence that the written form of the language predominated and the knowledge gained of the lexicon and verb
forms was not used meaningfully in communicative situations. Evaluation was through the external examinations set by the Cambridge Syndicate which were geared towards university matriculation requirements. There was no attempt to change this approach since it satisfied the learner’s needs — the minority who were either continuing to university education or would fill the most important posts in the country’s Public Service.

Up to the 1950’s when secondary education was still limited to a minority of the school-age population, the grammar-translation approach prevailed. However, new ideas and theories were coming to the fore in the more developed countries and the shift towards the audio-visual and audio-lingual methods in the United States and Britain during the late 50’s and 60’s affected the curriculum in Trinidad and Tobago to a certain extent. New materials became available and tape-recorders and film-strip projectors found their way into the local classrooms. However these new trends did not effect any fundamental change in the concept of the foreign-language curriculum. Where possible teachers who were aware of the new developments tried to incorporate them into their teaching, but they served the goal of attaining grammatical competence in order to be successful at written examinations with a heavy translation component. The new trends, therefore, failed to affect the basic principles on which the curriculum was founded and without any change of objectives, the new methodologies had no real relevance. Even those teachers who might have been willing to accept new objectives lacked the training to effectively implement these. In addition, these methods depended heavily on the help of the new technology, particularly the use of tape recorders and film-strip projectors; many schools lacked these tools, and even where such equipment was available, resistance to change from teachers who were unconvinced of the benefits of the new methods or administrators who were reluctant to give the support needed, e.g. special rooms, or a desirable schedule of classes, made whatever changes that occurred seem largely cosmetic. In the foreign-language classrooms the basic principles governing the choice of content and sequence of instruction were still conceived in grammatical terms although
incorporating to a limited extent dialogues set in a situational context.

Apart from the emergence of new trends and theories, developments in the wider society — primarily economic and political, have been and continue to be catalysts of curriculum change. The decision of the government of Trinidad and Tobago in September 1975 to make five years of free secondary education the norm for all students up to 16+, was such a catalyst. In 1961, 15.59% of the 11+ population was admitted to secondary school. In 1975 the percentage had risen to 48% and by 1980 the secondary school intake was 77.4% of the 11+ population. This meant that the composition of the student population was now considerably different. Instead of the top 15—20% selected for secondary education on the basis of merit, there were now students spanning a wide ability range, for the majority of whom the existing curriculum and means of assessment (the G.C.E. O'Level examination) were clearly unsuitable since “the statement has been made that the G.C.E. O'Level caters for the top 20% of an age group.” Recognizing this, the Caribbean Examination Council, whose General Proficiency examinations are gradually replacing the G.C.E. O'Level, has also introduced a Basic Proficiency examination which caters for a further 20%, still leaving however a large number of students who are not catered for by any means of assessment. At present, therefore, the largest number of secondary school students who are found in the Junior secondary and Senior Comprehensive schools are exposed to a curriculum which was designed to meet the needs of only 40% of their number, thereby condemning a large proportion of these students to inevitable failure. A consideration of the examination results in Spanish the only foreign language studied in all secondary schools will bear this out. In 1980, 19.1% of students writing the Spanish G.C.E. O'Level examination from government Secondary schools passed, but only 2.5% of the students from Senior Comprehensive schools passed. It would appear then that restructuring of the curriculum to take cognizance of the needs of this latter group of students is inevitable.
These problems are not peculiar to Trinidad and Tobago and the experience of other countries in handling such difficulties may be instructive. In the United Kingdom, because of the comprehensivation of schools and the raising of the school-leaving age to 16+, schools are faced with an ever-increasing widening of the ability range, and several proposals to restructure the curriculum and to devise methods of assessment that will encompass the total ability range are being considered. As far as foreign languages are concerned, the corpus of knowledge that the student must master in order to be functionally competent must be identified in terms of the lexicon, verb forms, sentence structures etc. Yet knowledge of these forms is useless without the skills, — listening, speaking, reading and writing, which enable one to use this corpus of knowledge meaningfully. Therefore as important as change in the curriculum content is the change in methodology. Recent trends are unanimous in accepting that the goal of foreign language teaching should be communicative competence and that this should inform whatever curricular changes are proposed. This goal is the essence of one of the more recent innovative proposals — that of the functional-national syllabus. Proposed by Wilkins (1972, 1976, this approach identifies the learner’s language needs and this forms the basis of the curriculum content. Wilkins identifies certain notions that are necessary for communication, e.g. quantity, time, as well as certain functions, e.g. greeting, seeking information, expressing emotion, socializing, etc. Wilkins criticizes the content of most foreign-language syllabuses which are grammatically based. The assumption of such a syllabus is that splitting the language into parts makes it easier for the student, who only has to grasp one part of the system at a time. However, this approach denies the student immediate returns and only after years of study, is he able to synthesize all the parts and use the language effectively. Many students give up, lacking motivation before reaching this stage. Other syllabuses may be situationally based, breaking down the language content into specific language situations but these also present problems, for while they teach what is relevant, the learner is exposed to diverse grammatical forms in one unit. The learner may, as a consequence, acquire the
appropriate response to a particular situation but may lack the ability to generalize the grammar learned in one situation to other situations. Wilkins suggests that the notional approach

"provides the means of ensuring the inclusion in the syllabus of communicative functions which have no unique grammatical realizations and no unique situational occurrence."

However, in a more recent article, conscious of the difficulties posed by the creation of a national syllabus, Wilkins has delimited the application of the national syllabus; recognising that

"our knowledge of the grammatical systems of language does provide us with a means to structure language learning in a systematic way."

In the light of the school context of language teaching he does not now advocate any wholesale change from a grammatical syllabus to a notional-functional one, but regards the notional-functional consideration as providing another dimension to the grammatical and situational parameters already existing. He suggests that this dimension has special relevance for remedial courses or situations where communicative ability is required from the outset, e.g. in intensive crash courses.

The functional-notional approach was initially designed for a special situation — the promotion of European integration through increased language learning with an adult population in mind. Yet it has general pedagogic implications with relevance for the situation in Trinidad and Tobago. The present situation is such that there is a serious problem of lack of relevance in the foreign language curriculum, which is largely oriented towards a heavy grammatical component, with emphasis on the written form of the language and the consequent neglect of the functional use of the language. Unable to cope with such a curriculum, large numbers of students opt out of language study or continue in the knowledge that they will inevitably fail to acquire certification in the subject. Apart from these educational reasons, motivation among language learners is also low because of social attitudes. Lang-
uage study is perceived as less useful and less prestigious in a developing country where technological skills are in great demand. Faced with these problems, the restructuring of the curriculum must take into account the learner’s language needs — and this is the starting point of the functional approach. However there are certain problems in determining these needs. Should the learners themselves be consulted? Should teachers and employers decide what those needs are? Although it may seem ideal to consult the learners themselves, many of these secondary school students will have no clear idea of their own language needs. However some surveys have been done which show a remarkable degree of unanimity by foreign-language students in the priorities they assign to their communication needs in the foreign language. Other suggestions for determining needs have been to conduct surveys among native speakers and professionals in the field as well as learners and combine their inputs.

In a developing country national needs must also be taken into consideration. In the Draft Education Plan 1968–1983, it is stated that the inclusion of a modern language in the Junior Secondary curriculum has as its objectives

“to develop an awareness of the structure and sound of either French or Spanish and of the culture of the Spanish or French-speaking peoples of the world especially in the Caribbean area; to promote facility in elementary conversation in these languages and to provide an adequate grammatical foundation for the further study of these languages.”

Therefore any identification of the learner’s language needs in our situation should take into account the need to communicate effectively with our non-English speaking neighbours in the Caribbean. Once needs have been identified, then they can be translated into learning objectives mainly behavioural or performance-oriented objectives since language learning at the initial stages is largely a question of acquisition of skills. Traditionally in the secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago students have been assessed by a terminal examination. By instituting performance objectives which can be assessed in the short-term, it would be easier to motivate students and
have them experience success. In Britain, teachers in comprehensive schools have been working on several pilot projects to devise such a system using graded tests, offering students the opportunity to obtain certificates on completion of each grade level. Apart from the motivational advantages, this ‘grade’ system also helps slow learners since each grade could be taken when the student is ready, so that abler students could move through the grades at a faster pace while the slower learner can progress at his own speed. This type of evaluation seems far more practical for that group of students in our Senior Comprehensive and Junior Secondary schools who are not being asserted by either the C.X.C. Basic or General Proficiency examination and for whom success in these examinations is an unlikely goal. In addition these students would not be burdened with too heavy a learning load.

In the United States a great deal of emphasis has been placed on individualizing foreign-language instruction especially with the aid of the computer. However, the value of this type of instruction has only been established for drills and practice which affect achievement but it has not been shown to assist with other cognitive skills. Its value seems to lie in supplementary or remedial instruction but not as a replacement for regular classroom instruction. In view of the high cost of such technology and the fact that computers are only now being introduced in a limited way into a few secondary schools, it seems that this is not the direction in which curriculum change would provide the greatest benefits given our needs and priorities.

Taking into account the national needs articulated previously, the foreign-language curriculum might help to fill those needs by adopting an interdisciplinary approach. This can be done for example with teachers of English by developing a total language curriculum. Some studies have shown that the study of a foreign language can have beneficial feed-back on other subjects, especially English. The study of a foreign language can also help in establishing in the student an 'awareness of language' since it provides the opportunity to rehearse basic concepts imperfectly grasped by weaker pupils, e.g. concept of time; it can provide practice in listening for mean-
ing and helps to clarify meanings in English by exploring alternatives in the foreign language.\textsuperscript{15} Hawkins suggests that this advantage can be maximized by a course which he terms an ‘awareness of language’ to bridge the gap between the mother tongue and the foreign language. This is an attractive idea particularly in view of the complex language situation of our students whose mother tongue is Trinidadian creole yet for whom the medium of instruction is the official Standard English and who must then learn a foreign language. The need for linkage between these three is important for the overall language development of the student. Such a course would allow teachers the scope for designing materials specific to the local situation, using as far as possible the student’s own language experience to cultivate an awareness of some of the socio-cultural aspects of language use.

Another aspect of the interdisciplinary approach could be in the area of Social Studies and foreign languages. Our geographical location, membership in the Organization of American States and historic considerations suggest that one of the objectives for foreign language study stated in the Draft Plan could be met by a Latin American studies component in the curriculum. Ochoa and Strasheim\textsuperscript{16} suggest ways of collaboration. Social Studies teachers can contribute information on the Economy, History, Geography and political systems of the countries to be studied while the foreign language teachers can provide information on the customs, values and other aspects of everyday life. Such collaboration implies “a recognition that language competence and understanding of the world are both necessary ingredients for global literacy.”\textsuperscript{17}

After learner needs have been identified it may be found that specialist language courses constitute another curricular option. Experiments have been carried out with total or partial immersion courses where the target language is used as the medium of instruction to conduct regular classes, e.g. in history or geography, or by blocking certain sections of the timetable to enable partial immersion in the target language for a portion of the day. However, these options present serious administrative problems with regard to timetabling, and may not be suitable for all groups of students — weaker stud-
ents may feel overwhelmed. A feasible option however might be language courses with a special orientation, e.g. Business Spanish. This seems to be more relevant for the more advanced learners, e.g. the age group 16–19, who have already been exposed to the language for a few years and can then pursue their individual interests via the continued study of the foreign language. This has been done successfully in the United States at the undergraduate college level, where students felt a need for a more practical and relevant alternative to the traditional literary studies.18 The experiment was successful, leading the researchers to suggest that similar experiments could be undertaken with advanced high school classes.

The Sixth Form curriculum in the Modern Languages has remained largely traditional since Sixth Form teaching has generally been regarded as a preparation for University. However, one of the consequences of mass education has been a desire for more schooling so that there has been a substantial increase in the number of students wishing to continue their education in the Sixth Form but not necessarily with their sights set on studying foreign languages at University. This change means that the traditional offering of language and literary studies at Sixth Form may not now be relevant to a substantial number of students and thought must be given to a revision of the curriculum at this level also. Some of the previous suggestions are also applicable. An alternative to studies of literary texts can be Latin American Studies – dealing with the history, geography, political systems and culture of the Latin American countries. Another alternative is the special language course, e.g. Business Spanish. The same considerations of needs and relevance previously discussed, should also determine the choice of content at this level.

The teacher’s role in curriculum development and change is essential. Without the teacher’s total involvement from the initial stages any attempt at curriculum change will flounder for as Beddoe says, “in the final analysis it is the teacher who will facilitate or frustrate the nature, direction and rate of change.”19 The problem with a highly centralized system such as operates in Trinidad and Tobago is that decisions tend to be made and are handed down to be implemented by teachers.
who get little opportunity to make inputs. Subject associations could assist in channeling teachers' views to the Ministry of Education and it would be a good development if all subject areas had effective associations. For change to be effective, teachers must be given the necessary support and resources to be able to implement the changes. This would involve in-service training courses for teachers to make them aware of new developments in curriculum practice, as well as the establishment of resource centres to make materials available to teachers and to instruct them in the use of new materials.

The most serious problems to be faced in changing the Foreign Languages curriculum would seem to be attitudinal. Teachers, students and parents need to accept the fact that assessment by the C.X.C. Basic or General Proficiency examination is not the only satisfactory, suitable or desirable form of assessment. Traditionally, examinations have exerted a dominance on the curriculum and will continue to do so, given the importance of certification in today's world, therefore acceptance of alternative assessment schemes is vital to the success of any curriculum change. What is important is that

"we should be striving to construct examinations which enable candidates to show what they can do rather than what they cannot. We can achieve this by defining realistic tasks and ensuring that the assessment techniques used are capable of rewarding the performance of those tasks."  

If this principle is accepted, then strict adherence to a curriculum unsuitable for all students would give way to a more flexible approach incorporating the needs of all learners and responding to a variety of interests. Without this curriculum change, the teaching of Foreign Language will continue to be considered irrelevant and its gradual erosion from the curriculum will be accelerated. For its own survival therefore, the curriculum in the foreign languages needs to change and diversify to cope with the new demands of our changing educational system.
REFERENCES


4. Ibid., p. 231.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid., p. 91.

11. Ibid., p. 92.


17. Ibid., p. 124.

