AN ANALYTIC LOOK AT A LANGUAGE COURSE DESIGN MODEL

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Abstract

This study aims to qualitatively examine and elaborate on the characteristics of the course design model devised by Graves (2000). Drawing upon the traditional components and principals of instructional design, Graves' course design model is innovative or different in that it has been more specially developed for language course design purposes and thus is believed to be more suited to the nature of language courses with its consideration of the main elements or characteristics of language teaching and learning processes. This descriptive study centers upon the seven main examination criteria, which are in fact the main procedures as suggested by Graves (2000). These are a) defining context, b) conceptualizing content, c) organizing the course, d) formulating goals and objectives, e) assessing needs, f) developing materials and finally g) designing an assessment plan. In this essence, each criterion was first introduced and explained in detail before the researchers extend their critical outlook into the functionality and practical use of the relevant steps and strategies recommended by Graves (2000). This critical analysis and review on the Graves' course design model revealed that the model employs the traditional components of the ADDIE generic and lends itself well also to be used in the other disciplines other than foreign languages. The final part of this report will provide suggestions as regards the potential application of the model specifically in English language curriculum development and more broadly in the curriculum and course development procedures pertaining to other discipline areas.

Keywords: course design model, English language teaching, instructional

1. Introduction

Instructional design has been defined as models or plans that can be used to shape the curriculum, organize instructional materials and guide instructional processes in classroom. For Branch (2009, p. 8) "instructional design is an iterative process of planning performance objectives, selecting instructional strategies, choosing media and selecting or creating materials and lastly evaluation." According to Chapman and Cantrell (2006) "redesigning a course is a creative process that is based on improving learning, which includes assessing overall curriculum needs, analyzing learners background knowledge and instructional needs, determining course goals, determining course objectives and the sequence in which to address them, developing and implementing instructional content, teaching strategies and assessment, conducting formative and summative course evaluations."

In fact, the terms curriculum design, curriculum development, and instructional systems design are often used interchangeably with the instructional design. More specifically, it can

be used in the meaning of course design. Whether it is for a one specific course or a full program of study, there are general or traditional components of an instructional design process. These traditional components have been collected under the acronym ADDIE where A stands for analysis, D for design, the second D for development, I for implementation and lastly E is for evaluation. Thus, it would be expected that the instructional design models are based on such main components to a certain degree (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004). Though there is a considerable number of instructional design models that could be utilized more generally and frequently with no respect to the discipline area or course (e.g., Dick & Carey, 1990; Gagne, 1985, Kemp, 1977, Posner & Rudnisky, 1997; Smith & Ragan, 2005), Graves' instructional design model has been entitled as a language course design model and gained popularity in the language curriculum and course development procedures.

2. Method

This study aims to conduct a critical review and evaluation of the course design model developed by Graves (2000). In other words, the study is a qualitative critical review and synthesis study. This kind of a review includes the description and uses of the specified course design model; but, its main aim is to perform "analysis and conceptual innovation" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 93). Thus, the researchers first collected data and documents about the course design model and more specifically on its uses, relevant components and developmental steps and stages. Following this phase, they derived examination criteria or themes based upon the main principles and procedures of the instructional design and these examination criteria were than narrowed down into the procedures and steps suggested by Graves (2000) because her instructional design procedures revealed strong parallelism to the already established procedures of the instructional design or simply the ADDIE generic model. These seven examination criteria were a) defining context, b) conceptualizing content, c) organizing the course, d) formulating goals and objectives, e) assessing needs, f) developing materials and lastly g) designing an assessment plan. The researchers then evaluated the model in respect to its characteristics, applications and conformity with the traditional insights about the instructional design process. The following presents the analyses and discussion pertaining to the components of the Graves' model in line with the examination criteria mentioned.

3. Results and Discussion

In her book "Designing Language Courses", Graves (2000) talks about her model of course design which she calls a framework. She contends that there are agreed-on components of course design, and she as well employed most of these components mentioned in the traditional and more recent models. These well-known components include objectives, content, materials, method and evaluation. Her course design mostly includes the basic components of curriculum development, which is something expected; but, the striking characteristic of the model she devised is its non-linear, flow chart-like form and the focus on the processes experienced in the course design. Given her course design framework (Figure 1), it is seen that processes have been described as verbs catch one's attention.
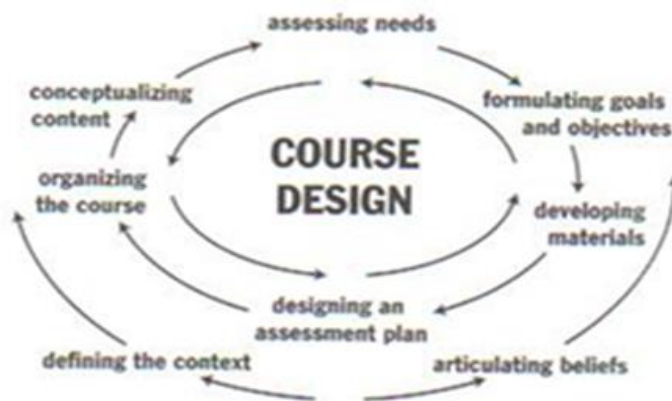
Figure 1. *Graves model of course design (2000, p. 3)*

It would be meaningful to assert that in Graves' model of course design, we realize that her model is credited with two main aspects. First, there is neither hierarchy nor sequence among the processes performed in the model. That is, you can begin the course design at any point you like as soon as it feels logical to you, which in deed relates to your own beliefs and understandings and also the context of the course you will design. In this regard, Graves (2000) places these two aspects, articulating beliefs and defining context at the very bottom of her framework as they will lead and provide the basis for all other processes in the model. The second aspect is that the framework portrays a systems approach to course design. What Graves (2000) means with this refers to the interrelatedness of the components (i.e. processes) in the model. In this sense, each process will influence and be influenced by the other processes in the model as any system works in this way. Accordingly, any change in one part of the system will influence the others. Therefore, where you start in the model, you need to consider other components and accordingly act on them.

Grave's (2000) utilizes verbs to describe the processes in the course design framework, which she explains with the idea of emphasizing the course design as a thinking process through which language teachers or course designers need to make reasoned decisions (based on reasoning and thinking) about each process of the course design, which will help them transfer their knowledge on teaching and learning languages into a coherent course plan. In fact, such a terminology fits into the thinking of course design as a work in progress. Graves (2000) criticizes following a logical and rational route during course design and asserts that thinking course design from a systematic point of view and work on one component as you work with the another (i.e. due to the interrelatedness of the components) makes the design work much more feasible and manageable. The model follows no designated route and one can move to the other components of the model without completing another one (or earlier one), work on more than one component at the same time and move between the components. Hence, Graves' (2000) course design model has a really non-rational shape with the components seem like floating and not staying motionless. Thus, it could be assumed that this non-linear form fits into the belief that there is a non-linear and organic way of learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). That is, when following a step-by-step model, language curriculum developers or practitioners may hold the bad feeling that they do something wrong if they are unable to follow the route already designated. This designated route may be sometimes inapplicable to their own situations and contexts. That is, that is why Graves (2000) recommends course design as a work in progress which is dependent on the context and experiences. As is the case with the Graves' course design model, those involved in the design procedures can change their routes and act on different components of the model as

needed, which in turn makes your work a never-ending one. The following presents and discusses these components of the model.

The component entitled as defining context and articulating beliefs is one of the foundations for the other stages and it refers to a thorough understanding of your students, setting and resources. The understanding of the context will provide you with an understanding of your resources and challenges that will influence and guide your decisions, which, could be assumed to be the cornerstone of the course design process. The by-component of the model, articulating beliefs about language, social context and learning/teaching is very important since our beliefs always lead us in our following decisions.

Content and sequencing component in most curriculum design models matches two parts of the Graves (2000) model, conceptualizing content and organizing the course. In this regard, conceptualizing content stands for deciding the most important content for the students to learn. It is a conceptual process in which course designers or teachers think about what they want and feel their students learn considering the characteristics of the students, their needs and purpose of the course to be designed. Furthermore, the designers decide on what to include, exclude and stress in relation to the course content in this component. In addition, a kind of syllabus (in the form of a mind-map, grid or a flowchart as Graves (2000) suggested) is prepared in this step to delineate the real content of the course. Graves' (2000) recommends some categories for conceptualizing content. These categories are a) language, b) learning and c) the learner and social context, and these are based on a review of literature on language teaching and learning. She further asserts that these categories are not fixed with certain boundaries, and no language course is explicitly based on all of these focus areas (categories). Major questions Graves (2000) provided in the book for designers to ask when conceptualizing the content, and these questions when combined with the three categories a language course could be derived from and built upon make a very good and firm foundation for one to organize the course content they want to teach.

Organizing the course refers to the actual design of the course syllabus and calendar and this component build on and complements the conceptualizing content process in the course design model. With the conceptualization of content, you have an idea or a plan in your mind, but it is with the organizing the course component that you organize it in a developed sense first of all by making your decisions about the organizing principles that will pull together the content you have basically conceptualized. It will be a good idea having two complimentary components to reach one product, in this case, the course syllabus is a good idea as it gives the course designer (teacher) some time to organize his or her thoughts on content selection. Having an idea about what focus the course to be designed will have in terms of language, learning and learner and the social context, the teachers are somehow performing a brainstorming activity which in turn enhance their reasoning for content selection. Therefore, before moving directly into the actual content determination and organization, they are having some time or stimuli which will solidify the direction of their course. Generating a conceptualization, the course to be designed (e.g. conceptualization of such a course with a topic, speaking skills and learning strategies or some other combination), teachers (course designers) supported by the goals and objectives, contextual features and their own beliefs, will be at a safer and better place to organize their course. Graves (2000) provides some details and insights with the content determination and organization in her book for the course designer. Her insights are invaluable as they are based on theoretical and research-based views.

Formulating goals and objectives gives you a direction in that you know about where you want your students to come out. Graves recommends several ways and models, such as KASA (knowledge-awareness-skills-attitude) framework, Stern's (1992) framework of cognitive, proficiency, affective and transfer goals and Genesee and Upshur's (1996) framework for the formulation of goals. For formulating objectives, again she comes up with variety of choices such as Brown's (1995) performance objectives and Saphier and Gower's (1987) framework. What Graves (2000) has done with the process of formulating goals and objectives is just recommendations about the ways to organize ideas on the goals and objectives of the course. It appears that Graves (2000) believe in the power of having goals and objectives for the course; but, she is not that strict about the ways of formulating these, and thus she offers a bulk of alternatives, which makes it manageable and flexible for the course designer, and this very much fits into the basic philosophy behind her framework, flexibility.

Assessing needs is a very important component of her framework in that the course designer makes further decisions in line with the interpretations she or he has generated based on the information gathered on the present (learners' level of language, their interests and preferences etc.) and future conditions (learners' expectations, language modalities they will use, types of communicative skills they will need etc.). Graves (2000) provides a needs assessment framework (cyclical in nature) with the set of decisions and actions identified, which is teacher-friendly to read and understand. Moreover, the needs assessment framework in the cyclical form is also consistent with the overall understanding of her course design model.

Developing materials is another planning process which includes decisions on the materials, techniques and activities to be employed. Graves (2000) uses materials development not only in the sense of creating, adapting and using materials but also in the sense of creating activities (based on repertoire of core techniques) for students to perform, and she places the developing material component adjacent to the determination of unit content. At this point, having only one terminology may have some teachers or designers feel complicated since when we say materials, the first thing that pops into one's mind is the actual materials they use in teaching such as textbooks, worksheets, videos, pictures and so on. Locating the developing materials process of course design next to the determining unit content makes sense because they go hand in hand especially in language teaching because it is sometimes difficult to think about units without first considering the instructional activities and materials (Posner & Rudnisky, 1997). Though she attempted to show a connection between content organization and materials selection, she used no more elaboration or guidelines on that point. It would be more helpful and interesting if she could have more touched upon creating and starting with the materials for content selection organization purposes. Although Graves (2000) provides a good synthesis of ideas to be considered when designing activities, there is a need for such a synthesis for the design of course materials. Though she provides a section on adapting a textbook on her book which will be really helpful for those who start curriculum design based upon an available textbook, this limitation to the use of textbooks leaves those teachers that want to use a novel or non-textbook dependent approach to unit organization with a feeling of vacuum and non-satisfaction.

Given the designing an assessment plan component of the model, Graves (2000) point out three interrelated roles of assessment in the course design which are assessing needs, assessing student's learning and evaluating the course. However, the focus of this component is student assessment and course evaluation. Graves (2000) distinguishes between student assessment and course evaluation. However, in looking at this section of her book, it appears

that Graves' (2000) model is lacking on the assessment process of the course design in that she suggests no rationale or guidelines that will help the designers to connect in to other components of the model. That is, how this component relates to or need to relate to the objectives set or to the teaching-learning process has not been emphasized; the bonds between this component and the others could have been made stronger with some guidelines or criteria for the teacher to consider when designing the assessment plan of the courses they want to develop. Though she makes it clear at the very beginning of her book that this model centers on planning course cycle of the whole course development stage, field testing or implementation component could have been added to the model. She mentioned that course design is a work in progress and you may change it as you put into real practice, but, she has no specific reference to the implementation of the unit or course you design before the actual use.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is seen that this model could be applied very well to the English language teaching area since the model itself has already been credited as a language course design model, and Graves (2000) makes a good connection between the use of the model in line with the language teaching principles and insights and the views of the professional community. In this sense, what Graves (2000) tries to put forth it is consistent with the language-teaching literature, and her suggestions on the use of the course design model blends theory and skills of language teaching and language course design. The model she devised is also suited to teachers' practical use because it is feasible, easy to understand and manage. Moreover, Graves' (2000) model is not the one that puts frames for teachers; it is a flexible one. Though some field-dependent minded teachers or course designers may feel awkward with this type of a flexible model, it could fit into the soul of language teaching and learning which is in fact unpredictable and non-linear. Furthermore, in the education systems where the teachers are often obliged to teach and strictly follow the pre-designed curricula, that is, simply being the instruments of pre-designed curricula (Campos, 2005, p. 10) rather than being active participants in education management and policy issues, Thus, based upon such conditions and exclusion of the teachers from the active roles related to education and students' learning, some teachers may appear to be reluctant to take active roles in the curriculum or even in materials development practices or they may start to treat the pre-designed curricula as something fully directive rather than simply a guiding or helping document. Hence, after a while, teachers start to show no creativity so as to simply talk about the topic as directed by the curricula or sometimes to teach to the test only. However, the researchers of this report believe in the creative and artistic power of the teachers in designing their own courses.

In respect to the debate on teaching as art or science, Olivia and Gordon (2012) agree that teaching could be placed somewhere between the two poles. Based on this view, teachers should be creative and at the same time be educated in the issues related to the science of teaching. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should take active roles and responsibility of designing the courses that they are going to teach and thus being creative and innovative. However, they should also learn and employ the technical components and principals of the instructional design process. In this artistic, creative and somehow technical course designing work, teachers are advised to utilize the Graves' course design model. Even though they may strongly need to follow the curriculum designated previously for them, every course could be improved and developed better to provide better outcomes for the sake of the learners. Thus, teachers could use Graves' course model partly, which means that depending on their needs in the classrooms, they may only focus on the components they need. For instance, if they feel that the language course lacks enough and necessary materials to present a specific content, they may only act on the materials development component.

Likewise, when they feel some problems related to the assessment procedures of the course they teach, they may only utilize the necessary procedures in respect to the assessment component of the model. Furthermore, they may even focus on one small part of one specific component in line with their needs. Therefore, teachers are recommended to utilize the model to supplement their courses as needed.

Though the model is basically famous as a language course design model, it could be effectively employed in other subject areas and target populations for the model possess all the basic components discussed in the curriculum development literature. As Graves (2000) has attempted to link it to the language teaching courses, one can easily connect it to other subject areas. Though the use of the model with technical courses for which the learning of technical matters is considered having a step-by-step, linear and organic nature bears some concerns, the model may be utilized in social studies and adult education especially when a flexible system of course design is needed.

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