

Teacher's Reactions towards Curricular Innovation

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Abstract

In the last issue of *rEFLections*, there is an article about the curricular innovation at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (Watson Todd, 2000). This article shows how the curriculum innovation was conducted. Now that the curriculum innovation has been implemented, evaluation of the innovation is needed. This paper presents a case study of what one teacher thinks about the new curriculum. A diary was chosen as the instrument to gain in-depth information. The findings indicate that the teacher analyzed the materials or activities and also her students and her teaching situation since she felt more freedom to adapt the curriculum to the needs of her students than she had felt previously. In addition, there was an improvement in students' attitudes, in their ability to speak, and in the way they presented. From the teacher's perspective, the teacher must develop a sense of ownership and be involved in the curricular innovation as a designer and an implementer for the curricular innovation to be a success.

Curricular Innovation

The Thai education system has been developed on the basis of using the same curricula as a core for the whole country. The curricula, especially for foreign languages, are mainly proposed by experts from 'core' countries like Britain, North America and Australia who do not truly understand the local context and culture. The resulting curricula are often more reflective of developments in ELT and EST in the core countries than the local situation (Holliday, 1994). Perhaps because of this, there is a lot of pressure for change in Thai education as shown by the National Education Act of 1999. Much of this pressure results from dissatisfaction with current teaching curricula and methods, which lead to failure in the Thai education system.

Alternative directions for developing courses and materials and for teaching are needed, particularly in English language teaching. The Department of Language, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) agrees with the need for change and decided to redevelop the whole of its language curriculum.

For the process of curriculum innovation, a tentative curricular framework was proposed which was further honed in a series of meetings among the staff. Certain key characteristics which distinguish the proposed curriculum from the previous curriculum can be noted as follows:

- Students are placed into two groups to allow for the heterogeneity of student intake.

- Courses based on discourse functions and skills have been replaced by process-oriented courses organized around tasks, projects and adjunct content-based learning.
- Courses incorporate self-access learning.

Considering all these key characteristics, it can be clearly noted that they directly serve both the students' learning and the National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999).

Within the process of curriculum innovation, however, there were some constraints which had to be taken into account. Most importantly, the curriculum innovation was mainly originated by staff from the Department of Applied Linguistics but the main implementers would be the Department of Language staff. The implementers in curriculum innovation are vital, so involving the implementers in curriculum renewal had to be given the highest priority. The initial reaction from the staff towards the proposed curriculum was worry concerning some teaching and learning constraints like workload, class size, ability to implement the curriculum etc. After some discussion, workshops and the piloting of a task-based unit (Watson Todd, 1999) which have been implemented as "strategic planning" and "tactical planning" (Markee, 1997 pp. 78-81), the curriculum innovation has been set up successfully with the implementers taking the leading role in task design.

Background of the Study

The Department of Language is responsible for providing EST support courses for undergraduate students of other faculties. The previous English curriculum consisted of a four-credit course and the content of the course was based on *Interface* (Hutchinson and Waters, 1984), an EST textbook mainly organized around discourse functions. For the second and third courses, students were given a choice from a set of skill-specific courses, such as Basic reading in EST or Communicative writing in EST. All of these courses underwent frequent modification but the underlying frameworks had remained unchanged for over ten years (Watson Todd, 2000). In addition, there was a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the curriculum from both the teachers and students. The teachers worked hard to produce supplementary materials to make the lessons more attractive and more relevant to the students whereas the students complained that the language input was not sufficient and that the content was boring. For these reasons, an overhaul of the curriculum was proposed. The course new courses take the form of a series of large-scale tasks, such as asking students to find their own resources to complete tasks e.g. the Self-Access Learning Centre, the library and the Internet (see Maneekhao, this volume). These tasks were chosen as a means to bring about both learning skills and language skills of learners in the new curriculum at KMUTT since tasks can provide a purpose for the use and learning of language other than simply learning language items for their own sake. Tasks also encourage hypothesis formation and testing, and teaching directed towards students' needs. Moreover, tasks have the potential to encourage holistic language learning (Rubdy, 1998; Willis, 1994 cited in Srimavin and Watson Todd, 2000).

Evaluation of Curricular Innovation

Any curricular innovation needs evaluation to see whether it is effective or not. This evaluation can be conducted at many points within the process of curriculum innovation, for example during the design of courses or during the implementation of the courses, and it can be conducted by several different groups of people. In this section we will look at who should evaluate the courses.

Either outsiders or stakeholders can evaluate curricular innovations. However, which one is chosen depends on what advantages are required. Even though evaluations of language programs are usually conducted by outside evaluators (Markee, 1997), outsider evaluations have a number of weaknesses. Outsiders may use their own methods which are not applicable in the situation under consideration. Then, the stakeholders might not accept any recommendations for improvement. Though outsiders are believed to be objective and free of conflicts of interest, it might be possible that they may put their own ideas into the evaluation without really understanding the aims of the innovation. Markee (1997) also states that most outsiders also have a limited time to deal with evaluation so they cannot perceive the innovations in the same way as teachers.

The situation at KMUTT is somewhat unique. The teachers were involved in the curriculum renewal at all stages, not only in implementing the new courses but also as participants or stakeholders who worked on the new curriculum right from the start. They were fully involved in the curriculum renewal process, and thus have developed a sense of ownership concerning the ideas in the new curriculum (Watson Todd, 2000). The teachers joined staff development workshops, workshops on learner training, the piloting of a task- based unit, and reading tasks relevant to the proposed curriculum. When everything was ready, all staff in the Department of Language started working together. Courses were designed, materials were made and then the innovations were implemented for the sake of our students.

Given this level involvement and the sense of ownership teachers now have, the evaluators of the innovations at KMUTT could not be anyone else except the insiders. Markee (1997) states that the most useful kind of evaluation is carried out by project participants for project participants or stakeholders (Weir and Roberts, 1994) who will use the results of the evaluation to sustain and develop the innovations.

The evaluation of the curricular innovations at KMUTT, then, was conducted by insiders. Wiriyakarun (this volume) evaluates the new curriculum from the perspective of the students, and in this paper, we look at one teacher's evaluation of the innovation.

Research Methodology

Subject (Ajarn Chada Kongchan)

Change is a complex process and one part of that complexity is the role of teachers' attitudes in the implementation of change (Kennedy and Kennedy, 1997). Ajarn Chada, the subject of this study, is an experienced lecturer in the Department of Language. She has taught both the old curriculum and the new one. She felt that the previous curriculum

was not interesting and attractive since the materials were dry, too specific on language input and lacked variety.

Teaching Situation

The course focused on for evaluation was LNG 101: Fundamental English I, which is the most basic English course offered at the university. This course requires students to spend 4 periods in class and 6 periods outside class for self-access learning per week. The course lasts for 15 weeks. The group of students taught by the teacher-evaluator comprised students of mechanical and chemical engineering. There were 27 students in the class. Most of them were less-able students since, from a placement procedure, they were placed in the lowest possible grouping. The previous experience of language learning of all the students involved a teacher-centred chalk-and-talk approach, and consequently, these students are not autonomous learners. In contrast, they prefer sitting still waiting for a full spoon of knowledge from the teachers. As a result, the approach taken in the new course was an approach unfamiliar to the students.

Data Collection

There several ways in which teachers can evaluate innovations, for example teachers could assess an innovation by survey (through questionnaires), observations, interviews, end-of-course debriefing (a formal interview after a course), group feedback (an informal class discussion), weekly minuted staff meetings (Weir and Roberts, 1994), transcripts of classroom interaction, or teacher's journals (Markee, 1997).

In this paper, the teacher decided to use a diary to gain in-depth information since the other evaluation procedures mentioned above cannot reveal such in-depth information. In addition, information gained from other procedures is kept only once or twice a semester while diary keeping can be conducted throughout the course.

Before class, the teacher-evaluator wrote the lesson plan and then after class, she wrote a diary jotting down whatever had happened in class and how she felt about it. Each diary was approximately two A4 pages in length. Consequently, each diary was divided into three parts. Part one was the lesson plan the teacher prepared for each class. Part two was a record of things happening in class, and part three was the reflections. Though keeping a diary after every single class seemed to be tough, the teacher-evaluator did not become demotivated. Surprisingly, reflection on everything happening in class made her enjoy teaching more and more. It might be because she could understand her teaching situation more clearly.

Findings

The diary was analyzed for frequency and salience of entries by both authors. The first aspect of the diary to consider for analysis was frequency of topic in the entries. From this, three crucial points were identified as occurring frequently throughout the whole diaries. One further aspect, even though it occurred infrequently, will also be discussed since it represents a salient point.

Aspects Occurring Frequently in the Diaries

1. Teacher's Awareness

Throughout the teaching of this innovative course, LNG101: Fundamental English I, it was found that the teacher kept on examining things happening in class all the time. She did not just carelessly follow all materials or activities as suggested step by step. Instead, the teacher always analyzed the materials or activities and also her students and her teaching situation.

“I think that before throwing students to take responsibility for their studies themselves, the teacher should prepare them first e.g. by a placement test for listening. There is not much time for them to cope with their outside class activities especially for reading and listening. Moreover, these students are new; they don’t get used to self-access learning. Therefore, I think taking them to do the placement test is better and I can save time waiting for the ones that might not do the placement test.”

(Week 6, July 10,2000: Placement test)

“In my opinion, students don’t have only problems on isolated grammar points or vocabulary but also on writing skills. Moreover, the portfolio and newspaper tasks require students to be able to write or at least to express themselves. Though some writing activities are provided in the newspaper session, I think it’s too late to wait for that session. Then I started teaching writing. I think I’ll provide and prepare some activities to enable students to be able to write e.g.

- sentences (simple, compound and complex)
- paragraphs (at least a list paragraph)

I also found that in LNG 102, LNG 103 and LNG 104 students need more writing skills from writing an e-mail through bulletin board or discussion list to more academic writing tasks in research writing. If students can’t write even a sentence and they don’t improve themselves now, they will face a serious problem in LNG 102, LNG 103 and LNG 104.”

(Week 7, July 21, 2000: Feedback session)

“ I feel that evaluating the presentation only once for 6% is not fair because students do not have a chance to practise evaluating their classmates on presentations. So I would like to let students have a chance to practise both presenting and evaluating.”

(Week 8, August 7, 2000: Finding a book of interest)

The above evidence shows how much awareness the teacher gained from teaching a new innovative course.

2. Teacher's Decision Making

The teacher-evaluator revealed that she could make decisions about her teaching freely according to students’ needs without any pressure from the curriculum.

“After discussing the plan with students, I have an idea that I would like to link portfolio (class reflection session) to feedback session (consultation 2). Therefore, I plan to join the 2 sessions together because time in class is not enough to do class reflection on portfolio in class. Moreover, what students wrote in their portfolio tasks can be used as a guide to

further their studies to improve themselves. So consultation and class reflection can be combined together.”

(Week 9, August 18, 2000: Time table discussion)

“Teaching about these symbols helps me to indicate students’ errors and also help students understand them. Normally, students express their feeling generally. They do not mention specific examples or clarify themselves. So I encourage them to see the way people express ideas more clearly by adding supporting details for both major and minor details. (I asked students to study a paragraph on diamonds.) I think that one way of teaching people to write is having them see and analyze what and how other people write.”

(Week 7, July 21, 2000: Errors in writing)

“Moreover, I need about 15 minutes to explain about the presentation activity that must be evaluated for 6%. According to the class on August 7, 2000, I assigned students to present only 3 items.

- What is a book about?
- How do you know the general information without reading the whole book?
- How does text organization help you to get general information?

However, I think that these guided questions are not enough and reasonable for the presentation so I add some more questions as follows:

- What is the name of the book?
- Who is the author?
- Explain the process of finding the book.
- Point out at least one problem you faced in finding the book.
- Explain how to solve the problem.”

(Week 9, August 11, 2000: Presentation on a book of interest)

“I felt that news is a special kind of passage. It is not the same as other general passages. However, general passages and news passages have basic structures in common: main idea, major supporting details, minor supporting details and also conclusion. When students want to summarize the news story, they can find out key words from those structures. Then, I decided to introduce a general passage to encourage students to understand clearly what those structures are and how they are used in the passage before dealing with a news story passage.”

(Week 12, September 4, 2000: Newspaper)

“I must find other sources to teach how to write a news story. Fortunately, Ajarn Suthida has a book on basic writing with a chapter on ‘The Journalist’s Questions: Five W’s + H’. So I can study it and find out the idea of how to teach students to write a news story. I feel that the five W’s + H questions will help students a lot in terms of planning, writing a lead and developing the news. Students can start from planning by answering those questions and use them as a plan. Then they can write a lead and finally other paragraphs as a developing paragraph of the lead.”

(Week 13, September 11, 2000: How to write)

“I found that it’s good to have a theme for all teachers to follow the same track. However, there is at least one way out for teachers who have different groups of students to do something else in order to suit their own students and also they can still base on the same track.”

(Week 14, September 22, 2000: Summary and final exam preparation)

The quotations above show that activities were changed, and materials were adapted and even initiated. However, the teacher still followed the objectives of the curricular innovation. In implementing the new curriculum, then, the teacher felt more freedom to adapt the curriculum to the needs of her students than she had felt previously.

3.Limited Time

Limited time is also an aspect stated throughout the diaries.

“No time to do the library search activity because the library timetable is fixed. Students have to present on Monday so they don’t have time to finish their worksheet. They may have to work on Saturday.”

(Week 8, August 4, 2000: Library search)

“Each group spent more than 6 minutes because they were asked questions. It took time because this was the first time students had to ask and answer questions during their presentation. The groups which were the audience faced difficulties in making questions while the speakers could not answer effectively because they had to answer immediately after they heard the questions. In fact, they couldn’t do so since they didn’t practise enough. Therefore, this section took a lot of time and then 2 periods were not enough.”

(Week 9, August 11, 2000:Presentation on a book of interest)

“ I didn’t have time to arrange a practice class for news story summarizing. Therefore, I could only show the suggested summary on KOREA WARNS OF YELLOW WIND DANGER and have students compare it with their work. Then they have to do their summary work individually for 8%. In my opinion, I feel that it is unfair for students to do this task because they have only one chance practising it. Moreover, they have to practise in groups to do the individual final task.”

(Week 12, September 8, 2000: Summary of a news story)

“I don’t have time to deal with the summary of the news story so students have to do their own work themselves. I felt unhappy about this situation but I can’t do anything more for my students because of the limited time.”

(Week13, September 15, 2000:Second draft)

“The problem was about the limited time. Students couldn’t finish their newspaper poster in time. Therefore, some groups had to keep on working on the exhibition day.”

(Week 14, September 18, 2000: Exhibition day)

“ I didn’t have time to do the activities as suggested so I had to adapt the activity to spend less time. However, it worked. Students enjoyed answering all the questions since those

questions helped them review things they've learnt. Unfortunately, the time in class is limited. So students didn't have so much time to deal with how to prepare themselves for the final exam."

(Week 14, September 22, 2000: Summary and final exam preparation)

Limited time mentioned above shows one serious problem of the curriculum innovation concerning time management. Since the teaching reflected on in this study, however, the amount of work and the number of activities on the course have been reduced.

Salient Aspects

Although diary entries concerning improvement of students occurred infrequently during the semester, they are worth stating because they show how much students have developed themselves through the curricular innovation.

Weak Points

"Students didn't do homework. Therefore, time was spent on doing it in class. I felt upset because this was a big problem."

(Week 3, June 19, 2000: Scanning)

"Students didn't do homework. Most of them ignore the materials I gave them the previous week. This is quite a big problem for Thai students. They don't take responsibility for their studies. They like to wait and take something from their teacher. They don't like to study anything themselves. Perhaps, practising those learning styles for 12 years in Primary school and High School level make them inert."

(Week 11, August 28, 2000: Aims of newspaper task)

Improvement

"Students worked quite well. They paid attention in doing this activity. It might be because everybody took part in this task equally. They also have to present their work in plenary. So they must do their best to show others that they can."

(Week 3, June 23, 2000: Intro to reading)

"I like the worksheet very much because it encourages students to listen to the librarian carefully. It also encourages students to be able to search for the book they want. Students paid attention to the librarian because of the librarians themselves and also the worksheet."

(Week 8, August 4, 2000: Library search)

Weak Point

"Most students can't speak clearly e.g. there are no verbs in their sentences. They just expressed important words."

(Week 2, June 12, 2000: Intro to self-access learning)

Improvement

"Students worked quite well in groups. Everybody worked hard to get the meaning of the vocabulary and find how they got it. The presentation sessions were quite good. They

spoke clearly. They also tried to speak English even though their English was fairly poor. This time I didn't prepare their language for them. However, they could start their presentation."

(Week 4, June 26, 2000: Intro to reading)

Weak Point

"I found that students' problems were as follows:

- Their voice is so soft.
- They didn't speak loudly. Only 4-5 students spoke loudly.
- Students didn't ask questions.
- Students read guided questions and answered them so it made their presentation boring."

(Week 8, August 7, 2000: Finding a book of interest)

Improvement

"I felt happy that students paid more attention to their presentation. However, they have some weak points, e.g.

- They spoke softly.
- They couldn't speak fluently.
- It took so much time to answer the questions.
- The audience asked fewer questions."

(Week 9, August 11, 2000: Presentation on a book of interest)

"Mechanical students did a very good job today. They could explain clearly on each section that appeared in the newspaper. They could also give examples. Moreover, listeners could compare the differences between *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. The listeners took notes from what they listened to. They also evaluated their friends on their presentations. In my opinion, I am so proud of my students because these students started LNG 101 with so little ability in speaking. Now they can explain things they've learnt. They can also deal with presentation techniques. They can ask and answer questions according to things they presented. I am very happy for these good things happening in class."

(Week 10, August 25, 2000: Newspaper presentation)

"According to the questions the audience asked, I found that students followed the presentation attentively. Moreover, most of the questions related to the presentation. E.g.

- What do you learn from this book?
- What do you think about this book?
- If you can't find this book in the KMUTT library, how can you do to solve the problem?
- Who is the target of this book? etc.

I also found that the audience tried to ask questions according to the missing points that the speakers forgot to talk about. Moreover, I am very happy to see that this presentation was not only for marks. Students showed that they were really interested in all presentations. It seemed that they were attending a real seminar and participating for real life purpose. All students prepared their presentations in advance. They had their notes.

They organized the content. They also planned to have all members present equally. Even though 5-7 students read more than they spoke, I think that this is all right for a fundamental course like LNG 101. For the overall view, I think they could achieve the goal of this presentation session both for academic and real life purpose.”

(Week 11, September1, 2000: Presentation on a book of interest)

The improvements shown above are an important and challenging point which suggests that the curricular innovation at KMUTT has been successful.

Conclusion

With the new curriculum, students are showing improvements which were not apparent with the previous curriculum. They show improvements in their attitudes, their ability to speak and the way they presented. These were the most noticed improvements but there were other improvements as well, which were overlooked in this diaries. Overall from the students' perspective, then, the new curriculum is a success.

Since the teacher-evaluator is one of the innovators, she feels more in control of the curriculum than she felt with the previous curriculum. From the diaries, we saw that the teacher's awareness of her teaching was raised and she felt willing and capable to make decisions about changing the contents, or the activities in the materials. Both of these effects may have occurred because the teacher was one of the implementers and designers of the new curriculum. Since she designed the new curriculum, she felt a sense of ownership about it. Therefore, she did not worry about making changes because she was making changes to her own work even though she had not designed that particular unit. In this way, we can see that it is crucial that teachers must be involved in any curricular innovation for the curricular innovation to be a success.

As we can expect with any new innovation, there were problems with the new curriculum, the main one, as we saw through the diaries, concerning time. At the time of writing this article, it is now half-way through the second semester and the time problems seem to have disappeared, because between semesters the teachers worked on reducing the amount of work and activities involved in the new curriculum. Again, they can only do this because they feel that the new curriculum belongs to them and they are free to do what they want. So again, we can see the importance of involving teachers in the curricular innovation.

From this article and from the research into the students' attitudes towards the new curriculum of Wiriayakarun (this volume), it can be seen that the curriculum based on tasks at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi has been a success for all involved both for student learning, for teacher development, or for freedom and control of the course.

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