This volume from Australia will make an important contribution wherever educators struggle to meet ever-changing student needs. As an example, in the U.S. today thousands of teachers in adult ESOL classes are scrambling to adjust their curricula to the demands of the government’s amnesty program, which requires not only language instruction, but also instruction in U.S. history and government. The Learner-Centred Curriculum would benefit these educators as they confront this curricular challenge. The significance of this book is not restricted to Australia and the U.S.; it has a place wherever teachers, students, and program planners try to develop and improve their curricula.

The author addresses two major questions: What is curriculum? How can it be learner-centered? Nunan’s answers are based in part on his synthesis of current research and theorizing, and in part on a number of studies carried out with Australia’s Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP), which includes more than 1,500 ESOL educators and more than 120,000 adult students.

In traditional education, curriculum has meant a set of goals established by “experts.” These goals are often implemented by sets of prescribed materials and activities. The role of the teacher, then, is to carry out the prescribed activities using the prescribed materials, and to use prescribed tests for evaluation of both students and teacher. This view of curriculum, like so much else in education, has come to us from industry, specifically the factory. When the factory is a model for schooling, students and teachers have little or no say in the school’s goals, or in the materials they use, the activities they perform, or the tests by which they are evaluated.

A learner-centered curriculum, on the other hand, derives its goals, its implementing materials and activities, and its evaluation from the students and teachers themselves. In this approach to education,
one needs a great deal of information about the learners. Programs that serve similar populations over a period of time can gather data on current students to use as the foundation for planning future curricula. Some of the necessary information is obvious: One needs to know the students’ ages, previous education, nationalities, employment situations, and so on. Other information includes the students’ expressed goals, for example, the following (adapted from Nunan, p. 62):

I would like to
- talk with my child’s teacher.
- talk with my neighbor.
- read the newspaper.
- fill out forms.
- attend university.

These goals are translated into communicative tasks; the tasks then are placed in contexts with topics, settings, interlocutors, etc., determined by the different goals of different groups of learners. The tasks in their contexts may be sequenced according to difficulty (admittedly sometimes an intuitive decision), except when the students are in an open entry program, where sequencing is almost impossible; or they may be arranged in order of importance to the students. One of the main differences between this curriculum and a functional syllabus is that, in the former, the functions come from the students.

The book is organized into 10 chapters. In each, Nunan summarizes the most pertinent recent articles and research, and discusses possible applications. In Chapter 1, the author establishes both the questions to be addressed and the means of addressing them. Chapter 2 presents theoretical and philosophical perspectives, focusing especially on the distinction between product- and process-oriented approaches. Nunan merges the two here.

Chapter 3 compares content-centered and student-centered approaches to language curriculum development, referring to theories of adult learning and of communicative teaching that support the student-centered approach. This chapter also reports three studies with AMEP teachers that indicate their attitudes toward planning curriculum and toward communicative language teaching. This focus on teacher attitudes reflects Nunan’s emphasis on the central role of teachers in curricular planning.

In Chapter 4, the author discusses initial planning processes, including approaches to student placement. What sort of information needs to be gathered about the students? How is that information
used to place them? In the U.S., many ESOL placements are made on the basis of English proficiency only (as measured by the TOEFL or some other instrument), but Nunan lists many other factors that should be considered. Among these are the following: (a) the students’ short- and long-term goals in the language; (b) the students’ previous education; (c) the time the students have been in the English-speaking country; and (d) the time they intend to remain. Teachers who have faced a “beginners” class in which some students were Vietnamese professionals and others were Hmong farmers, illiterate in their own language, recognize the necessity for considering something other than oral proficiency as a basis for placement.

Chapter 5, “Planning Content,” deals with the fundamental issues of (a) describing general goals in specific terms along with performance objectives; (b) defining the role of grammar; and (c) deciding how the language instruction is to be arranged in a graded sequence. Nunan lists several aspects of the learner, the task, and the text that should be considered in making these decisions. Learner factors, for example, include confidence, motivation, prior learning experience, learning pace, observed ability in language skills, cultural knowledge or awareness, and linguistic knowledge.

In Chapter 6, Nunan considers methodology from a communicative perspective. This chapter also addresses an important dilemma: How can we reconcile teachers’ preferences for a communicative and learner-centered approach if learners prefer a less communicative, more traditional approach? Nunan documents the likelihood of such conflicts. Drawing from a study (Willing, 1985) in which over 500 AMEP students ranked different class activities, Nunan asked 60 AMEP teachers to rank the same activities: Although there was some agreement, teachers’ and students’ rankings were at opposite poles with respect to pair work and student self-discovery of errors.

Chapter 7 discusses resources, including those from authentic and community sources. Nunan advocates the use of authentic materials by controlling the difficulty of the task, rather than controlling the difficulty of the materials. He cautions teachers who want to leave the classroom in order to use the community as resource that careful preparation is required, reminding them that many students do not regard field trips as valid language learning activities.

In Chapters 8 and 9, the author addresses the issue of evaluation, not only of students, but also of teachers, of activities, and of program effectiveness. Nunan suggests techniques for student and teacher self-evaluation.
Chapter 10 looks to the future, considering ways of discovering and documenting student goals and abilities at different stages, and suggesting what teachers need in the way of training and support if they are to be responsible for developing the curriculum. Nunan underscores the significance of the task at hand:

The most urgent need is for the profession to adopt a more rigorous approach to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum... [and] to develop a more rigorously-formulated and empirically-based approach to language proficiency. (p. 175)

The Learner-Centred Curriculum offers an important contribution to this end.

REFERENCE


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