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Firma:

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The actual work of writing this project has been fun for me. With Alexander Pope, I find myself saying of my research:

I must confess it was want of consideration that made me an author:

I write because it amused me;

I corrected because it was a pleasant to me to correct as to write;

And I published because I was told I might please such as it was a credit to please.

To what degree I have done this, I am really ignorant;

I had to much fondness for my productions to judge them at first,

And too much judgment to be pleased with them at last (1880?, p.3)

I thank my professors, who not only gave me the vision, but also the confidence that I could achieve it.

I also thank the many students and teachers who were always ready to listen to me and fill out different papers.

Summary

This study explores the realities, possibilities and difficulties of involving students in the process of developing their own curriculum. There is a large body of literature which discusses how students can and should be involved in this curriculum development process, but only a handful of studies address what happens when students actually participate in considering and choosing the material they will learn.

In this study, sixteen Polimodal level students were interviewed to analyze their current English program, and how it could better meet the needs they had for learning English. They suggested many ways of improving courses. Students said they wished to be consulted about what they wanted to study. Also teachers were asked to answer questions on this topic and their comments were that students do not know what they want, or if they do, they do not know what is good for them, and that students do not usually wish to be involved in curriculum decisions, anyway.

Students said they liked classroom interaction, even though the teachers questioned this, given their reticence to actually become involved in class discussion. The teachers had mixed responses to the idea of student involvement in curriculum decisions, with half energetically encouraging this type of participation, and half considering it the teacher's role to set direction, and the student's role to follow fairly unquestioningly.

In conclusion, even First Polimodal students have ideas about how they want to learn English. Students see good and bad in how they are taught, and say they would like more of a chance to discuss curriculum issues with their teachers.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Some time ago I had almost reached my home after the day's work when I saw a stranger asking in English to a secondary student the whereabouts of a certain street he was looking for. I soon realized the student could not understand what this man was asking so I walked where these two people were. I pointed it out to him, "Straight down and to your left." Assured that I had been understood, I walked on. As I did, many questions came to my mind: Why our students can not have a simple conversation in English? What do they do in an English class? Who is responsible for this situation? How can English teachers help the secondary students learn English?

As I consider curriculum questions which could lead to research, these issues keep coming to the forefront in my thinking. What is the student's role in the educational process? How can the teacher work with students to assist them, but not to help too much? What responsibilities fall to the student in the learning process? How useful and reliable is student input, and what do students gain by being included in the curriculum process?

For several years now, researchers have been urging that more attention be paid to teachers' voices (Dewey, 1929; Schubert & Ayers, 1992; Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Lieberman, 1995). Others have argued, some for many years (Nicholls, 1989; Schubert & Lopez, 1994; Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995) that this same openness must also be extended to students, who are, after all, directly concerned with the results of the educational process.

This study focuses on student involvement in curriculum and on what roles students desire to take and can or should take. The main question, however, is about student ability to comprehend and theorize about the curriculum, and how this may change over time as students gain experience with the subject matter. I will be working with language learning and teaching at the secondary level, since I have much experience, both in teaching and research. Since not much has been written on this subject, however, I will review the literature for student involvement in curriculum in the broader field of education, as well as that directly related to English as a second language (ESL).

The issue of teaching English in Argentina is one that every school has to face in today's global community. The field of ESL has sometimes been accused of being

utilitarian, devoid of academic content or significance. There has been a great deal of discussion about the validity of this accusation. Pennycook (1994) claims that the root of the problem is in the view of language teaching as "an innocent and neutral process unconnected to the politics of education, culture or knowledge" (p.14). But all education is value-laden, even basic ESL. Students can be taught to think and respond critically, or merely to parrot answers.

There is a basic distinction drawn between a content-based English program and one that is focused on language. Assuming a content-based program, Pennycook (1994) suggests that adding a critical element is still difficult, since the content is in reality secondary to teaching language, and often it is not intellectually stimulating. Pennycook's solution to this dilemma is to suggest that:

> ...By focusing on language as social practice and by always relating language to its broader social and ideological contexts, critical language awareness can focus on both language and content simultaneously, and can develop analyses critical of both linguistic and social norms (1994, p.19-20).

Students need to use language in order to develop their skills. There is no reason not to make that language practice intellectually, as well as linguistically, stimulating.

One response to the dichotomy between language and content is to use language, especially at advanced levels, as "a means of communicating ideas" (Shaw, 1996), thus increasing fluency and language abilities.

A number of researchers (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Pennycook, 1994; Simmons & Wheeler, 1995) are calling for English language students to be more involved in designing their own curriculum. Some terms for this involvement include self-direction, students as curriculum theorists, negotiating the curriculum, power-sharing, shared authority, cogovernance, collaborative decision-making, democratic deliberation over policy, codevelopment of the syllabus, and low-structure teaching contexts (Nicholls, 1989; Shor, 1996; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Nunan & Lamb (1996) introduce their book on the teacher's role in self-direction by stating that the "concept of self-direction on the part of both teachers and learners is one to which we unashamedly adhere" (p.1). This is one way of combining critical thinking with the necessary assimilation of language content. Whether using the language learning process as content, or some other subject matter, students not only are capable of being involved in their own education, it is "good for them" (Simmons & Wheeler, 1995; Brookfield, 1990).

Rebecca Oxford (1995) has studied the idea of *learning strategies* which students use to help them learn language. Students may use these strategies automatically, but if not, they can be taught to use them, in order for the students to be more in control of their own learning. The idea of learning strategies, then, is often tied to the idea of students as curriculum theorists, but it is not necessarily the same. Remembering to ask questions, rehearsing what you plan to say, or associating new words with something familiar is not the same as thinking about what you should be learning and why. Teachers who teach their students learning strategies are not necessarily encouraging students input, or creating a student-centered classroom. These strategies can still be taught, learned and used by rote.

Studies like Nunan & Lamb (1996), Pennycook (1994), and Simmon & Wheeler (1995) suggest a study like mine. If it is good for students – in this case, language students – to be involved in their own education, that participation must also include questions of curriculum. It follows that if students are truly to participate in critical thinking about the curriculum and in curriculum decisions, then we need to know what kind of input to expect from them. What happens in the classroom when students do get involved; what kind of results should be expected, and what difficulties might be planned on? Teachers and students often find barriers to student involvement in curriculum theorizing and decision-making. My study attempts to bridge the existing gap between studies which suggest the theory that student involvement is a good thing and studies which detail the practice of actually making it happen. It does this by looking at what students say they need and want for their ESL program. This study might give teachers ideas of what to expect, so they could be better prepared to deal with student input.

A. personal perspective

As a benefit of the environment at Instituto Adventista del Plata D-4 in Entre Ríos, I have developed interests in students and teachers as curriculum theorists. The works of Freire, Dewey, and others, as well as my extensive readings in the area have piqued my interest and make me a believer in democratic education.

During my own graduate work, I spent time trying to make sense out of my own curriculum, and what I really wanted to learn. I knew which classes I liked, how did they hang together and make sense as a curriculum for me, and what would I be when I

was done? I have basically answered these questions now, but I thank those who set up the Ph.D. curriculum for leaving room for the experience of creation. The personal growth I gained from this experience could not have happened in any other way. Through my own experience with curriculum, my thinking has matured immensely, and with it, my confidence, and my abilities, perhaps in that order. I have been given the freedom to choose what to learn, the tools to know what it is I have learned, and the ability to judge that knowledge critically, and to have some idea of its value.

In my own graduate work, I struggled with issues of ambiguity; with unresolved and unresolvable dilemmas. Only later did I find that other scholars had been there before, and had written about these ambiguities:

> We live in an ambiguous and paradoxical world, a world that is filled with diversities, contradictions, and dilemmas. We are both other-centered and ego-centered. We want to serve and to be useful, while at the same time getting, at the very least, our share. We want to win while being a good sport. We want to obey and to bend the law. We want the glamour of youth and respect for our age. And we simultaneously cling to tradition and reach out to seek the new, to change while remaining stable (Smith 1982 p.44).

As I struggled to meld what I was learning into my own personal philosophy, I often felt more like I was struggling for survival then simply adding to my knowledge. Again, I have since come to realize that my experience was not unique in this respect. In the words of Rossman (cited in Smith, 1982):

> The learner...learns as much by the process of his own creation as by recreating others' past learning...His learning in a subject takes him deep in its penetration of his self, and outward in its embodiment in society. He grows along his subject as a vine does along a trellis, over many years and windings (p.91).

My hungering and struggling were painful as I tried to understand the things I was learning and the changes that were taking place inside myself; but in the end, I was rewarded with a deeper level of understanding, both of the subjects I was studying, and of myself. Once again, I now realize that this, too, is a part of education that others experience:

> Risk brings its own rewards: the exhilaration of breaking through, of getting to the other side, the relief of a conflict healed, the clarity when a paradox dissolves...Eventually we know deeply that the other side of every fear is a freedom. Finally, we must take charge of the journey, urging ourselves past our

> own reluctance and misgivings and confusion to new freedom. Once that happens...we are on a different life journey. (Ferguson, cited in Smith, 1982, p.90).

This concept of experiencing the curriculum in a meaningful way impressed me so much that I have decided to study it further in the form of this present study. The idea of student involvement in curriculum has been suggested for some students in a more general sense: active involvement in curricular decisions promotes commitment to learning and deeper understanding of the material learned, and therefore should be pursued as a valuable teaching tool (Baxter Magolda, 1994).

As I have taught and done research with language students, many of them have complained to me that their classes are not helping them learn what they need (want ?) to know. The students I have talked to often suggest that they want to work harder in their language classes and that they are willing to put in more time and effort if they are really learning something important. They fault their teachers for being too picky, for not letting the students advance at a reasonable rate, and for generally teaching the wrong things. While this evidence is entirely situational, I have heard it often enough to think that most students have some sort of opinion about what they should be learning. As Littlejohn and Hicks have put it, " Students do not approach the task of learning a second language as empty vessels; they bring with them knowledge, opinions and ideas built up through their mother tongue" (1987, p.89).

Student dissatisfaction is not an unusual problem in language teaching. Nunan's (1995) idea of a mismatch between student and teacher goals does not really surprise anyone who has regular contact with groups of ESL students. Without agreeing on the goals of the class, however, it is impossible to meet the needs of both students and teachers. As Dewey reminds us, meeting students' needs and catering to their interests may have more effect than we like to admit on how much they learn: "Most of the time, we are reasonable accurate if we assume that student learning is influenced by interest" (cited in Mayhew & Edwards, 1936, p. 361).

With these kinds of experiences and concerns as a background, I have turned my research efforts towards attempts to make English as a Second Language (ESL) education more meaningful for Argentine students. In considering what kind of research could be interesting and enlightening both to the field of ESL and to the broader field of education, I make several assumptions about the nature of students,

teachers, and education. None of these are particularly new or radical, but I lay them out here as an introduction to my theoretical perspective:

1. Second Language learning is similar enough to other kinds of learning that studies from other areas of education will enlighten the field of ESL, and vice versa. This study is not about language learning per se, but about students and curriculum, using language learning as an example.
2. Neither students nor teachers are empty vessels; they have experience, intelligence, culture, and personality which they bring to the language learning process.
3. Teachers and students also bring goals and expectations to the language learning process, and these are not always similar.
4. The language curriculum is a slippery concept, which has many forces tugging it in different directions. There is probably no way to bring all the desires of all the participants into agreement on all issues.
5. It is important for students and teachers to dialogue on these issues, not only to clarify the major concerns of each group, but also to participate in curricular contemplation and decision-making. It is helpful to realize that clarifying purposes in this sort of a dialogue is an education in itself: In considering the larger implications and goals of the curriculum, the dialogue process is not just a means to an end, but it stimulates growth in understanding that is in itself a major goal of the process (J..D.Brown , 1995).

The Research Project

In J. D. Brown's (1995) book on language curriculum, he suggests that students should be the focus of any good needs analysis, since they are the ones who care most about the outcome. He does not suggest, nor do I, that theirs be the only voice that is heard. The question is, what can we learn from students when we talk to them, and what should we expect?

In considering the idea of student participation in curricular decisions, one question keeps returning to my mind: Is student input reliable enough to use as a basis for curriculum decisions? That is, is there sufficient consensus among students about things that would be helpful to learn that it can actually guide practice? Are their ideas specific and reasonable enough to be helpful, even if they are not debated in class with heavy teacher input?

In this study, I take students' answers and read their ideas, suggestions, and opinions. I do not discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of their suggestions as I might were I their regular teacher. Mostly, I read their answers and validate their thoughts simply by going over the survey, and not being critical. This project combines my interest and experience in English as a Second Language (ESL) with my background in students as curriculum theorists. It is a response to Brookfield's (1990) assertion that:

> There is no benefit in being responsive to situations or events you feel are important, if students do not share your sense of importance. It is all too easy to think you are working assiduously on students' behalf without actually ever asking whether they see your efforts in this way (p.29).

The term *students as curriculum theorists* is one on which I have taken from the field of education, from the work of John Nicholls (Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995). The term basically means that students can and should theorize about the curriculum – they should consciously think about what they are doing, why, and what they should be doing. Theorizing in this case means students developing a personal theory about curriculum; not prescriptive theory, not critical theory, but personal theory about what is important to know and experience. Nicholls suggests that students need to know something about the curriculum in order to do this: Making blind choices about what to do considering the consequences is not theorizing.