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Teaching French at Higher Education and Curriculumn Issues

Mengajar Bahasa Prancis di Pendidikan Tinggi dan Masalah Kurikulum

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Abstract

This article aims to evaluate the effects resulted from the implementation of a new curriculum for the teaching of French as a foreign language (FFL) at undergraduate level. Since majority of students found foreign language coursebooks (FLCs) not motivating, a curriculum that aims to develop language competences by excluding FLCs was designed. The theoretical framework of the curriculum is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, on the Bologna Process and on the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. The designed curriculum may be used in different institutions if altered in line with learners' needs.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of a new curriculum for the teaching of French as a foreign language (abbreviated as FFL in English and as FLE in French) from students' point of view. It is a classroom based action research implemented in prep classes of a state university. One may wonder why there is a for a new curriculum without the use of a foreign language coursebook (FLC henceforth), since when foreign language teaching is concerned, almost all stakeholders of education from primary education to university would think of learning a foreign language with FLCs. Indeed, when one analyses the catalogues of outstanding publishers of FLCs such as Hachette, Didier FLE, Clé International, s/he will observe that they offer a large variety of options to students of any age group. Undoubtedly, using FLCs facilitates educational activities, helps the instructor in educational planning processes, provides guidance while organizing in-class activities and ensures course materials to be at a level in compliance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, it has some insufficiencies that lead us to find out a new way of French teaching: First of all , majority of our students find FLCs boring: In the interviews, students were asked to comment on positive and negative factors that affected their learning and their opinion about courses. Although theye were used different FLCs, students kept saying that they found none of the FLCs interesting. Especially they mentioned that texts in the FLC were long.

Secondly, despite the fact that there are numerous FLCs available at the market with regard to different target audience and field of specialization, foreign language learning is still restricted to general aims. According to the researcher, coursebooks are written by "one size fits all" point of view disregarding the locality, and the content is not always compliant with today's student needs. Other researchers also point out some insufficiencies of coursebooks use in the classroom: Edge & Wharton (1998) and Apple & Jungck (1990) find textbooks as a "de-skilling" instrument which causes the diminution of cognitive and pedagogical skills of teachers. A similar criticism comes from Littlejohn (1992:84) who states that coursebooks "reduce the teachers' role to one of managing or overseeing preplanned events". Crawford (2002) summarizes several shortcomings of textbooks among which we can enumerate some as inappropriate language use, lack of discourse competence and equity in gender representation, inadequate cultural components, and problems with the contextualization of language activities. As a result of the above mentioned deficiencies, the researchers decided to eliminate FLCs from target education and did research about how to teach without a coursebook. Surprisingly, there is not any study tackling the issue of French teaching as a foreign language without a FLC. Although there are many articles or books about curriculum design, teaching methods, evaluation of coursebooks, no empirical study dealt with FLE without the help of FLCs.

Main part

Foreign language teaching in Europe is carried out in accordance with common policies set out by the Council of Europe (CE). With the introduction of CEFR, these policies have been transformed into a resource from which instructors and students may benefit. CEFR specifies necessary competences for language learning. As an example, "Linguistic competences include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system" while sociolinguistic competences are related with the social aspect of language. Pragmatic competences focus on function, role of context in the construction of meaning, coherence and cohesion of discourse and speech acts . In the CEFR, there are 3 broad reference levels of proficiency as A, B and C, each of which is divided into two sub-levels. In each reference level, what students can do is specified for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. 234 CEFR identifies students as social agents who fulfill a certain task under a specific situation and condition . During a course, in order to accomplish the demanded task, students have to communicate. The communication is carried out successfully only if the student correctly analyses the social status of the listener, the communication context and the linguistic material he or she will employ in accordance with his or her intension, and this requires the utilization of appropriate speech acts for the communication context. As mentioned above, CEFR established the qualifications to be acquired in compliance with language competences for all language levels. In other words, it facilitated the task to design the stages required by a curriculum to be drawn up based on the backward design. The stages pursued in the curriculum were as follows: identify the language competences to be acquired by students, specify the target behaviors for each language competence and specify the content, and specify the educational material and activities. The backward design also starts with needs analysis. Richards defines the goal of need analysis as "to collect information that can be used to develop a profile of the language needs of a group of learners in order to be able to make decisions about the goals and content of a language course". In this study, needs were specified following the democratic approach, i.e. the demands and concerns of students as well as the opinions of the instructors were received and the curriculum was designed accordingly. In the preparation of the new curriculum, among the teaching approaches, the learner-centered approach was pursued as it enables the curriculum to be designed on the basis of students' needs . Hence, the student participates in the course actively and learns with respect to the language teaching method of the professor, either by writing or fulfilling the task etc. The instructor eludes the role of authority giving information and assumes a participatory role regulating the learning process. Such properties of the learner-centered approach are also among the elements highlighted by current language learning methods.

This study based on action research, presented a new sample curriculum for prep schools where French is taught as a foreign language. Designing a curriculum requires various fields of education to be taken into consideration. In this respect, the theoretical background of the proposed curriculum was based on CEFR and speech acts in terms of foreign language teaching, on learner-centered approach in terms of educational sciences, on backward design in terms of curriculum design, and on QFHE set out by CoHE and the Bologna Process in terms of higher education policies. The designed curriculum as such was tested by means of action research. The action research employed in the study was oriented towards program development. Data were collected through a questionnaire from the students in the research. The findings obtained as a

result of data analysis revealed the efficiency of the curriculum from the students' points of view. In French prep schools, teaching based on language competences and speech acts has various positive aspects compared to education based on the use of FLCs. In the first place, because the new curriculum is designed after the needs analysis, it tries to link the localness of learning with global expectations, and offers a 'made to order' solution to its intended audience . In the second place, far from being a de-skilling instrument , it allows teachers to design their course as they wish (of course respecting the speech act of the week), thus, encourages teachers' creativity. Instead of reducing teachers' roles, it provides them a learning environment where they can reach to their utmost potential. In contrast to teaching with a FLC, the instructor is not restricted with the text, audio material etc. given in the FLC. S/he may use any activity s/he wants in the class, which may in turn improve the motivation of the teacher and the students. In the third place, as the FLC introduces a subject in a specific context, students see only a single context for a specific speech act in FLC use. However, since a specific speech act is studied in different competence oriented courses in this practice, students can reinforce what they have learned in various contexts. Utilizing the same speech act in different contexts, they can also improve their lexical and pragmatic competences. Findings obtained in this study support researchers' point of view by exposing high success rates of the course efficiency after the implementation of the new curriculum. Verbal Communication, Reading and Written Communication courses are available at the curricula of French Teaching departments. However, the classification in the curriculum presented here and that in undergraduate programs are rather different. Courses in undergraduate programs are designed separately.

Conclusion

A student may fail Reading 1, yet pass Reading 2 or Writing 1. There is no (or little) direct connection between the contents of these courses except their levels. In the curriculum offered for French Prep School, on the other hand, all language competences are connected with each other through the utilization of the same speech acts. Every week, effort is made to introduce the relevant CERF qualification through related speech acts for each language competence. As a result, this research shows that we are not bound to FLCs in FLE, and presents a curriculum with which students are satisfied. This sample curriculum presented for French teaching is designed for prep schools at university, but may give successful results within the body of other educational institutions if altered in accordance with the new students' profile.

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