

Negotiating objectives in a language program

Keywords

learning objectives, goals, curriculum coordination, program development, assessment

This paper outlines, with specific references to a 1st-year English course, the interactive and ongoing process of developing program-wide objectives in a language department at a private women's university in Japan. This process is achieved by facilitating consensus among teachers in coordinated courses as well as developing curriculum by facilitating teacher dialogue. The narrative concludes with practical suggestions for program developers who are considering implementing program-wide objectives in Japan. Interested readers may access the supporting program documentation online at <www.nwuenglish.org/teachers/>.

本稿では、日本の私立女子大学の言語学科におけるプログラムの目的を開発するインタラクティブなプロセスについて述べる。その中でも、特に1年生の英語コースに着目する。このプロセスは、教師の対話を促しながらカリキュラムを開発していくと同時に、複数の教師が担当するコースの中で教師間のコンセンサスを形成する一つの方法として説明されている。本稿の最後では、日本でプログラムの目的を実践しようとしているプログラム開発者達に示唆を与える。関心のある読者は、オンライン上で、次のサポート・プログラムにアクセスできる。<www.nwuenglish.org/teachers/>

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THE IMPORTANCE of goals and objectives in language programs has long been stressed (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Brown, 1995; Mager, 1975; Richards, 2001). However, while there is information on the introduction of objectives in individual courses (Griffie, 2004), much of the literature on TEFL education at universities in Japan suggests many language programs have failed to implement clear objectives (Cowie, 2003; Hadley, 1999; McVeigh, 2001; Prichard, 2006). Cowie, describing a national university, writes that:

Teachers have a great deal of freedom as to what and how they teach. They are assigned course titles such as: 'English Conversation 1' and 'Writing 1' and so on, but beyond these simple labels it is entirely up to each teacher to devise and deliver a curriculum. (p. 41)

A transition from this situation to a curriculum with coordinated objectives involves a significant paradigm shift. Even assuming some consensus on the importance of coordinating course objectives, the critical and often controversial question remains as to what form those objectives might take. Over the past 3 years at Nagoya Women's University (NWU), the International English Program (IEP) has undergone the transition from just such an assortment of course titles to a coordinated program with objectives for all English courses. Implementing objectives was not a one-time occurrence but has, instead, proven to be an ongoing, and cyclical, process involving teacher negotiations and syllabus adaptations. This paper presents this evolution in a 1st-year general English course and then outlines suggestions for educators considering the introduction of program-wide objectives.

Initiating objectives

The implementation of detailed written objectives for all courses began in 2006 with the introduction of goals and classwork checklists, written by three full-time teachers. According to Richards (2001), objectives differ from more general goals in that they describe end-goals in smaller units of learning; provide a more concrete basis for organizing classroom activities; and offer descriptions of learning in terms of observable behaviour (p.123).

Writing the objectives in the form of checklists and sharing them among teachers and students encourages reflection on the objectives at both the outset and completion of the course. Objectives have been divided into *skills* and *classwork*: for both teachers and students it is important to not only define language skills but also the work that students are expected to complete over the course of the semester to acquire those skills.

A creative process

Creating objectives is best seen as a process. Pennington and Brown (1991) note that this involves negotiations and choices that will "be significant in defining the ultimate character of the ever-evolving curriculum" (p. 63). This process of negotiation is less likely to succeed when it fails to include the teachers who teach the courses. The tertiary system in Japan often relies on a high percentage of part-time teachers (Hadley, 1999), presenting significant coordination challenges for program developers, especially in creating opportunities for inclusion in teacher dialogue.

In an attempt to get over this hurdle, the IEP has taken several steps to facilitate dialogue (Venema, 2007), perhaps the most important of these is coordinating meetings. (Venema, 2006) To allow both full-time and part-time teachers to meet and share information on the courses they are jointly teaching, all teachers in a given course, which meets at the same time and day, finish classes early twice a semester for 30-minute meetings.

Since 2006, minutes have been kept of all meetings by one full-time teacher. These minutes summarize each teacher's input and are distributed to participating teachers after the meeting. Keeping minutes serves to recognize all teachers' input and provides a record of their contributions. For the purposes of this paper, minutes also provide a record of teacher dialogue, albeit limited. Individual teacher contributions, recorded in an abbreviated form, cannot provide information on the dynamics and subtleties of the

dialogue taking place. Still, particularly where information on classroom activities for individual teachers or suggestions for improving the course is documented, the minutes do provide useful information to highlight the ongoing negotiation of course objectives. Excerpts of these minutes illustrate the program development process in the Basic English course.

Basic English: The course

Basic English (BE) is a compulsory, interdepartmental 1st-year course first written and introduced by a full-time faculty member in the spring of 2005 (Barker & Venema, 2005). Taught over two semesters, (BE1 and BE2) it is a conversation course with the primary goal of tapping into students' existing knowledge of English in order to develop their ability to take part in simple conversations. For most teachers the following aspects of the syllabus required significant shifts:

There is no textbook for the course: the content primarily originates with the students themselves in the form of (teacher corrected) questions and answers, compiled and recorded by students in their notebooks.

A common oral final exam was set where teachers did not grade their own students. Instead, teachers swapped classes for the exam and graded students using a common rubric (Appendix 1).

A more detailed description, including objectives and teacher notes, can be found in the current version of the *English Teachers' Handbook* (Venema, Emori, & Jarrell, 2008, p. 17–19).

Negotiating objectives

Coordinating classes and teachers

The objectives for BE 1 were first set as checklists in April of 2006 (Appendix 2). However, the minutes of coordinating meetings revealed lingering disparities, where Teachers A, B, and, to a lesser degree, C appear to be working toward diverging objectives such as role-plays and functional topics, instead of conversations on everyday topics as outlined in the course checklist.

Teacher A is focusing on functional topics (role plays) upon which he can solicit and provide students with structural input. He is presently working on the topic "planning a party" with structural input on modals of advice and suggestions.

Teacher B has been working on role plays on the travel theme, including restaurant role

plays, hotel role plays, and shopping role plays. He intends to focus more on conversation from this point on.

Teacher C has been focusing on functional topics (*How do you...?*) and on themes such as travel. He has been expanding on topics from the first semester by providing students with language input in the form of worksheets.

Teacher D talked about a separate class in a different department. This is a review class where students have been focusing on the basics of conversation as outlined on the class goals checklist. These skills include question making, expanding on responses, and asking follow-up questions.

(Coordinating meeting minutes, Basic English, October 2006)

Indeed, some questions arose when, as outlined at pre-semester orientation and written in the course outline in the *English Teachers' Handbook* (Venema, Emori, & Jarrell, 2008), teachers swapped classes to evaluate students on a 5-minute conversation test. It quickly became clear that students in some teachers' classes were unprepared for the oral test, indicating that classes throughout the semester had been devoted to objectives diverging from those set for the course. Six months later, however, coordinating meeting minutes indicate significantly more consensus among the teachers:

Teacher B

1. Explained details of the oral test at the outset of course to motivate students.
2. Has added materials from the textbook *Nice talking with you*.
3. Has incorporated a flowchart with Question/follow-up Question/How about you?

Teacher C

1. Based decisions on the checklist.
2. Included an extra topic – self introductions.
3. Has now finished family topic and will start on free time.
4. Has incorporated handouts from the textbook *Talk About It*.
5. Students get questions from two sources – brainstorming in groups and *Talk About It*.
6. Is using the notebook as suggested in syllabus notes.
7. Averages about 30 minutes of free talking time per class.

Teacher E

1. Starts every class with free conversation – multiple partners.
2. Added materials from textbooks *Nice Talking with You* and *Many Things*.
3. Included instruction on discourse markers in conversations.

(Coordinating meeting minutes, Basic English, May 2007)

While teachers are incorporating different materials, and different kinds of activities, all of them, including Teachers B and C from the earlier coordinating meeting, do appear to be working towards the main objectives of the course. While a common oral test no doubt played an important role in coordinating teacher efforts, the opportunity for teacher dialogues, and their potential for awareness-raising regarding course objectives, was also important.

Adapting objectives

Educators should avoid viewing the setting of objectives as a single task. Instead, the negotiation that results from efforts to arrive at consensus is also an opportunity for ongoing curriculum development. This dynamic process is readily evident in BE, particularly in BE2, the second semester of the year-long course. As the course became increasingly coordinated, it was suggested that the objectives themselves might be inadequate for a full-year course:

Teacher B

1. Inquired as to how the bar could be raised in BE 2.
2. Feels that students need to be challenged more in second semester.

Teacher D responded that they are now considering 2 ways to raise the bar:

1. Incorporate anecdotes
2. Include longer conversations and topic change.

(Coordinating meeting minutes, Basic English, July 2007)

Indeed, the two innovations, anecdotes and topic change, were incorporated in BE2 in 2007 (Appendix 3). As with any changes to the objectives of a course, the process is best seen as provisional and ongoing. This is evident in the minutes of a different block of BE2, for students in a different department:

Teacher F

1. Will assess students separately from other teachers and will not be swapping students with another teacher for final oral test (agreed at first coordinating meeting).
2. Has been focusing on basics of conversation not anecdotes – students still have serious structural issues and tend to rely on Japanese.

Teacher G

1. Will be able to evaluate course and the incorporation of anecdotes after test.
2. Ss have no problem in keeping conversation going 5 minutes.
3. Weak point of students is anecdotes.
4. Wonders if Ss may feel uncomfortable monopolizing conversation long enough (30 seconds) to tell anecdote.

Teacher H

1. Ss needed to be stopped after 10 minutes speaking – no problem in keeping conversation going.
2. Ss can tell anecdotes but have trouble fitting them in to a conversation (overuse *By the way*).
3. Takes over a minute for students to tell anecdote – enough time on test?

Teacher I

1. Anecdotes are good, most Ss were also successful in inserting them into conversations on mock tests.

(Coordinating meeting minutes, Basic English 2, December 2007)

In this block of BE, there are 4 different classes, where students selected one of three levels:

- Level 1 (Teacher I): Those students who felt BE1 was not challenging enough and want to move at a faster pace.
- Level 2 (Teachers G and H): Those students who felt BE1 was about the right level and want to continue at the same pace.
- Level 3 (Teacher F): Those students who felt that BE1 was quite difficult and would like the opportunity for review and consolidation.

Teacher F, in Level 3, negotiated a set of objectives without anecdotes included, in response to the needs of students in the lowest level class. Of the remaining three teachers, only Teacher I in Level 1 was confident that his students had attained the objective of incorporating anecdotes into conversations. BE2 evidently requires further

fine-tuning; specific questions that need to be addressed include:

1. Does BE2 need diverging objectives for different levels?
2. Is the objective of incorporating anecdotes in conversation an appropriate one in a compulsory 1st-year course?
3. Does the time required for students to contribute anecdotes detract from the larger goal of conversation? How long should the anecdote be?

These questions need not be seen as failures of the objectives or the course. Instead, the ongoing re-evaluation of objectives is an important part of the continuing process of curriculum development.

Suggestions for program developers in Japan

There are serious challenges for tertiary language programs that attempt the move from a loose collection of course titles to courses with common objectives. Some tentative suggestions offered here are based on the experiences of teachers at NWU, including both successes and failures.

Lay the groundwork

The implementation of common objectives in a tertiary setting such as outlined by Cowie (2003) is a significant paradigm shift, and a reasonable degree of consensus, particularly among full-time professors, is of obvious importance. Program coordinators might be wise to start with the coordination of specific syllabi and courses, before trying to tackle the implementation of broader department-wide objectives.

Take the long view

See the process of implementing objectives as just that, a process, and not a one-time description with subsequent efforts devoted to ensuring that teachers toe the line. Where teachers can be brought together, the best form of persuasion is indirect: the evident enthusiasm and competence of other teachers who are already on board. Programs moving towards increased coordination may be dealing with teachers who have been operating with complete autonomy for years, if not their entire career. It is only sensible to offer teachers both time to adapt and the opportunity for input.

Be transparent

Communicate what you are doing and why, and be sure to outline expectations of teachers. While it is important to allow for both time and negotiation, coordinated objectives ultimately demand the cooperation of teachers. Despite making efforts to achieve consensus some teachers may refuse to comply. Part-time teachers, on yearly contracts, ultimately have the job flexibility to seek employment elsewhere.

Provide unifying goals

Be sure to outline both general goals as well as specific objectives. While objectives provide crucial information for assessment and the organization of classroom activities, their very detail may cause confusion as teachers and students struggle to find the time to meet all objectives for a course. In the end, program developers should be sure to clarify one big idea which teachers and students find both worthwhile and attainable. This goal can serve as the guide through the inevitable highs and lows of a semester or year-long course.

Provide concrete examples of classroom activities

While well-written objectives do provide a basis for organizing classroom practices, concrete ideas on classroom activities can help clarify them. The most valuable are those that have proven successful previously. These suggestions can be provided in handbook or in course files made available to all teachers. Perhaps more importantly, where teachers are given the opportunity to meet, the sharing of classroom ideas is a natural outcome of teacher dialogues.

Define how objectives will be assessed

Be sure to clarify how each of the objectives will be assessed, and consider omitting objectives from course descriptions that you are unable or unwilling to assess. Where some objectives are being clearly assessed and others not, the result is typically that teacher and student efforts are devoted to the former at the expense of the latter. In the end, there should and will be learning occurring that is not specified in any syllabus. A program developer need only clarify core objectives.

Remember the big picture

Any given course is only part of a larger interconnected whole, a curriculum working towards a coherent vision of language competency. Individual

teachers, particularly part-time teachers, may often be unaware of all aspects of the general program. Gaps in students' ability in one course may be better dealt with in other courses. Similarly changes to one course may have implications for another.

Conclusion

Although goals and objectives are only one part of a wider program and curriculum, they are a critical part. For teachers, as well as program developers, goals and objectives provide a provisional description of what it is the program and courses are working towards, and a means by which to gauge success. An interactive process of developing objectives, while complex and even problematic, can also be a dynamic and clarifying one, making assumptions about language learning and student needs explicit. Language programs which do not take steps toward the developing objectives not only fail in an opportunity to develop a coherent sense of purpose, they also miss out on a critical and dynamic tool of curriculum development.

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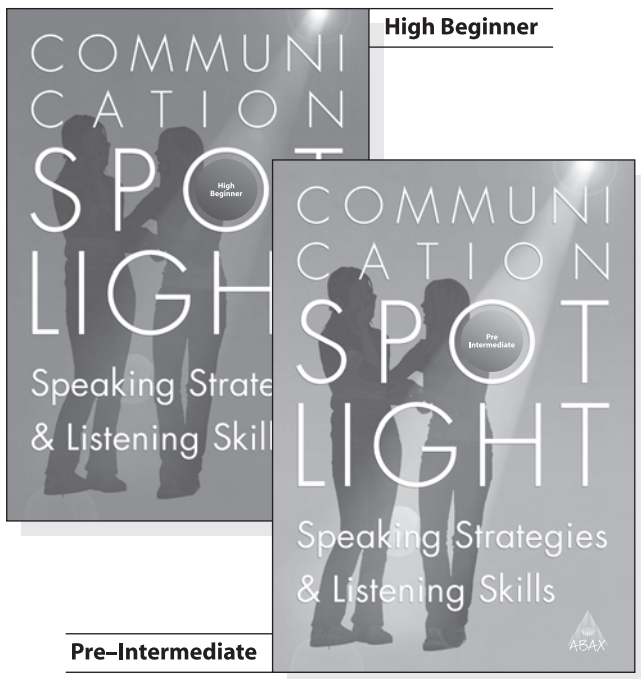
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Appendices

Appendices 1 to 3 can be viewed online at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2008/0808a.pdf>



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