An English Language Bridge Course as a Project Outcome

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Abstract: *On the basis of the overall analysis of the academic results of Bachelor's degree first year students at Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus, Ilam in the then-preceding three years (2010-2012) it was identified that the failure in Compulsory English had had a considerable share for the low pass rate in all the three faculties (Education, Humanities and Management) offering the subject. With an aim to minimize the failure rate the campus authority assigned the author to prepare an English language bridge course to be commonly implemented in all the three faculties for a month before the actual classes started. In such a situation, the first task for the author was to identify and analyze the English language learning needs common to the learners from those faculties. This paper highlights how, as a process of research, those common needs were identified to be used as the contents of the course; what methodology was used; how the inadequacy of materials was dealt with; and how the assessment aspect was designed. One important message stemming out of the endeavor was that it is sometimes pointless to seek a theory or philosophy to be based on before beginning a project, or during the process: a theory is ultimately a generalization observed in this world rather than something imported from another planet. However, the paper also sets out to pinpoint and assess the theory and principles underlying the then-pragmatically developed course aimed fundamentally at fulfilling the immediate institutional need.*

Keywords: Bridge course, Compulsory English, extended meeting, skeleton, Core Committee

1. Introduction

Language teaching has globally been an integral part of the academic curricula. In Nepal, English occupies an important position as a foreign language in the school level (also higher level) curricula and has been offered as a compulsory as well as an optional/major/specialization subject. Among others, the deprivation of physical, technical and methodological opportunities for students is a commonly pronounced problem as regards learning English as a foreign language in Nepal (Bista, 2011). Because it is a foreign language, both teachers and students have little chance to use it for communicative purposes outside the classroom. Consequently, a replica of poor English-background students can also commonly be encountered in the higher-education classes. In other words, there seems to exist a sort of 'gap' in the curricular, physical, pedagogic and academic systems and circumstances between the secondary level and the university level programmes. This scenario results in a considerable number of higher education students failing in English every year as a tendency, supported by the overall analysis of the students' failure in this subject at the college/university level. Although English is often regarded as a 'tough subject', there is always a growing craze for it in Nepal.

English language teachers and students in Nepal often report to have experienced a number of problems constituting needs or demands to be specially treated in the institutional programmes as for their support. Keeping this in mind, M. R. M. Campus Ilam, the first autonomous and quality assured constituent campus under T. U., took initiatives in the year 2012 to develop and implement a local bridge course for Compulsory English commonly applicable to Bachelor's degree first year under all faculties prevailing at the Campus, and "left the sole responsibility of the undertaking" to this author. In fact, the author as the assignee had realized that in the process of designing the course and determining the methods, materials and assessment patterns, he had accepted to prepare a course. In so doing, he had automatically accepted number of challenges, particularly being: i) inclusive, in that it needed to be an English language bridge course equally effective for all faculties (Education, Humanities and Management) which implemented Compulsory English ii) practical and practicable, and iii) limited, in that the project needed to be completed within four weeks, a month in the beginning of the session. In other words, the tasks and challenges were somehow associated with all kinds of change: professional, academic and administrative (Markee, 2010, p.172).

Eventually, a bridge course for Bachelor's level Compulsory English was designed under the author's leadership to meet the needs of the students learning English as a compulsory subject in general and encountering the new teaching-learning situation of the Campus in particular. This paper highlights the process of identifying the learners' needs leading to the course contents, methods for handling the course properly, determining the teaching and learning materials and designing the assessment patterns of the course. It also attempts to explore the philosophies and principles of language course designing, which remained underlying at the time of designing the course.

2. Procedures

This section highlights: i) the overall step-wise procedures followed ii) the procedure of data collection and content selection iii) the procedure of content extension /specification and the determination of objectives iv) the procedure of content integration and sequencing v) the procedure of the deliberation of the final version vi) the approach adopted for dealing with the inadequacy of materials.

2.1 The overall step-wise procedure at a glance

The design process followed a seven-step procedure as represented in Figure 1.
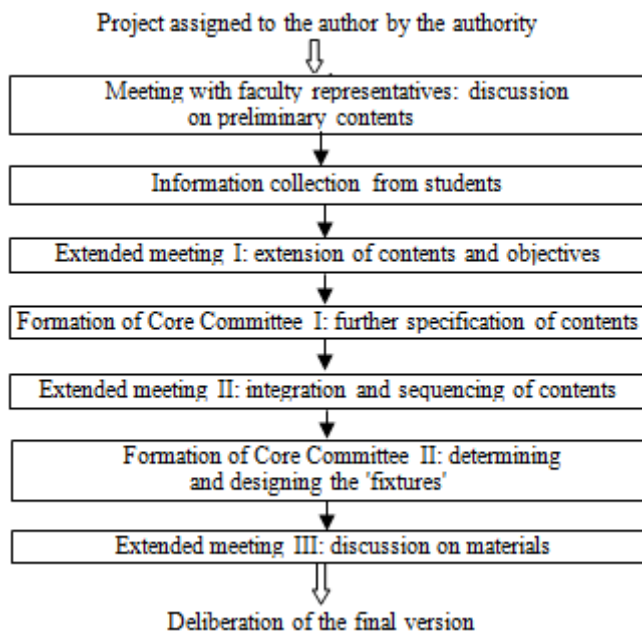
Figure 1: The step-wise procedure followed

In fact, the project was a single-person responsibility assigned to the author. Yet, he preferred it to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, right from the beginning of the process he collaborated with the faculty representatives, and by the time it was finalized ample attempts had been made to ensure the inclusive participation of all the primary stakeholders: the teachers as the innovation actors and the students as the beneficiaries. The step-wise process which was followed is elaborated in the sections below (2.2-2.5).

2.2 How the data were collected: how the contents were selected

Most part of the data came from the primary source, namely the Heads of the Departments (HODs) of English from the faculties available at the Campus and other English teachers judgmentally selected. Also the students themselves contributed as participants and provided with a lot of information to the contents for the course. It is especially noteworthy that, at this stage, no theory or principle was particularly considered as the theoretical basis of the course; nor any secondary source of the data was consulted.

2.2.1 Teachers as preliminary content providers

At first, the author with the capacity of the assignee called a meeting of the representatives of English from the three faculties- the author himself representing Education, the Head of the Department (HOD) from Humanities and a representative from Management- and informed them of the purpose. The meeting comprehensibly discussed the agenda and came up with the preliminary outline of the major 'matters' to be covered by the course. In fact, the proposed 'matters' were just raw in that they were subjectively biased and faculty influenced. For example, the one representing Humanities focused on the reading on those genres which would help the development of literary awareness and the vocabulary needed for that in the prospective learners whereas the one representing Management emphasized the inclusion of the aspects of technical writing needed for business operations. Of course, the author- representing Education- naturally emphasized the need for covering and balancing the four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing and grammar as a language aspect. Finally, the meeting decided on the following tentative contents as the unit headings:
a) Classroom English
b) Vocabulary
c) Grammar
d) Language skills and their integration

In addition to these 'matters' the meeting ended with two important mandates as a process for the next meeting. They were: i) collecting information from the Bachelor level students of each of the faculties, and ii) ensuring a greater representation of the teachers involved in teaching English from all the faculties (i. e. an 'extended meeting').

2.2.2 Learners as further information providers

As per Mandate i) in Section 2.2.1, a team of teachers having participated the 'meeting' (see Section 2.2.1) visited two classes from each of the three faculties- first and second years of Humanities, Education and Management (see Acknowledgements below), thus altogether six classes. Hence, the teachers who had already experienced classes in Compulsory English were covered. First, we (the teachers) familiarized the students with our purpose of visiting their class and then requested/encouraged them to contribute actively to the discussion. Notably, we allowed them to use whichever language, English or Nepali, they found comfortable in explaining their information. Then we asked them a single-slot question: 'What problems/difficulties did you usually have while learning Compulsory English?" As necessary, we also put some 'side queries' as the students were individually explaining their problems/difficulties they faced while learning the subject. We noted their problems/difficulties down in a diary as the individual students explained, and collected a good amount of information- from the actual learners. The information collected in this way in a week's time served as an agenda for the next 'extended meeting' which was also participated by the other teachers.

2.3 How the contents were extended/specified and the objectives determined

As soon as the task of collecting information from the actual learners was accomplished, the 'extended meeting' was held. At the meeting, five accomplishments were achieved: i) report on what had been accomplished so far ii) legacy acceptance of the work of the previous meeting iii) inclusion of the information collected from the students as the course contents, and iv) further specification of the contents determined by the first meeting, and v) determination of the objectives.

Thus, having incorporated the information in the previously determined outlines, the newly extended outlines appeared in the form as presented below:

1) Classroom English
2) Vocabulary
3) Grammar
4) Language skills and their integration
5) Counselling*
6) Techniques of tackling examinations*

(With the information from the students as input, the marked (*) ones were added to the previous set of outlines by the 'extended meeting')

Additionally, on the basis of the data so far achieved, the following course objectives were passed by the meeting:
1) To build up confidence in the students in using the English language, especially classroom English'
2) To equip them with dictionary skills, particularly word meaning and word grammar,
3) To enable them to explore grammar from contexts and operate grammatical transformations of the simple present and simple past,
4) To give them practice in skill-based language learning activities, and
5) To acquaint them with the examination strategies.
(Source: Poudel, 2012, p. 5)

Thus a rather tentative outline- the skeleton- of the course was achieved. The meeting then realized that the 'skeleton' needed to be specified in detail with the addition of 'practical work' as appropriate to get it a complete design. To this end, a 'Core Committee' comprising three members- the same as at the first meeting-was formed. It was also decided to meet again to discuss the tentative design as soon as the Committee would have accomplished the assignment. The Committee worked out on it for two weeks. In so doing, it specially considered the information from the students and the other input achieved at the 'extended meeting'.

2.4 How the contents were integrated and sequenced

After two weeks, as soon as the 'Core Committee' had completed the assignment, another 'extended meeting' was called to discuss the draft. At the meeting, a comprehensive discussion contributed to three aspects of the further improvement of the draft: i) necessary additions to and reductions of the specified contents, ii) integration of the content headings compatible with each other so as to achieve the course units iii) sequencing of the contents (applying the formula 'simple to complex' as the guiding principle)   .

Then the sequence of the contents, along with necessary integration, appeared thus:
Unit I: Classroom psychology and speaking English
Unit II: Vocabulary: meaning, word grammar and dictionary skills

Unit III: Grammar
Unit IV: Language skills and their integration
Unit V: Techniques of tackling examinations

As a future direction, it was also realized through discussion that the contents needed some 'fixtures'- course name, description, time allotment, instructional techniques and testing patterns. The meeting unanimously formed a 'Core Committee II' comprising three members- one teacher from each faculty- and entrusted the assignment to it so that the draft would appear as a 'course'.

2.5 Deliberation of the final version

Having worked out for a week, 'Core Committee II' proposed the final version of the course with the following outlines:
1) Name of the Course: **A BRIDGE TO BACHELORS'***(A Bridge Course in Compulsory English for Bachelor's Degree First Year)*
2) Course Description
3) Course Objectives (4)
4) Course Contents in Detail (5 units)
5) Instructional Methods/Techniques
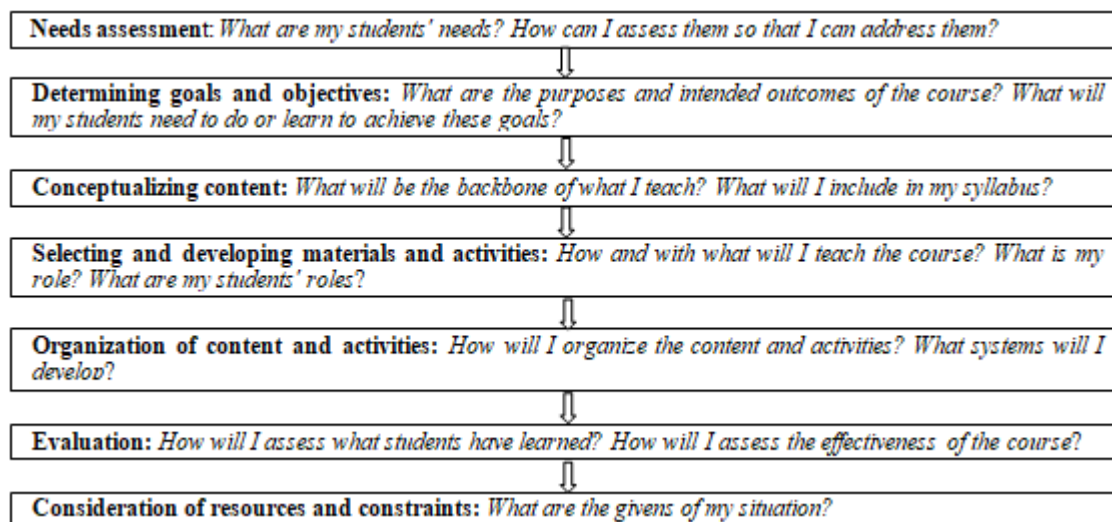6) Evaluation Scheme and Marks Allotment
With some minor amendments to the outlines and a reservation about the materials needed for implementing it, the course got passed unanimously by the extended meeting.

2.6 How the inadequacy of materials was dealt with

In fact, no material was provided! The inadequacy had two reasons. First, the assignment was limited to a design of the bridge course, but not any materials to implement the design. Secondly, since it was a locally designed course stemming out of the teachers' experience and the students' problems/difficulties in learning Compulsory English it demanded for originally developed materials addressing the local needs, too. Therefore, a conditional provision was made about the 'prescribed textbook' **- A Bridge to Bachelors'** (course manual) forthcoming under the supervision of the Board of Experts.
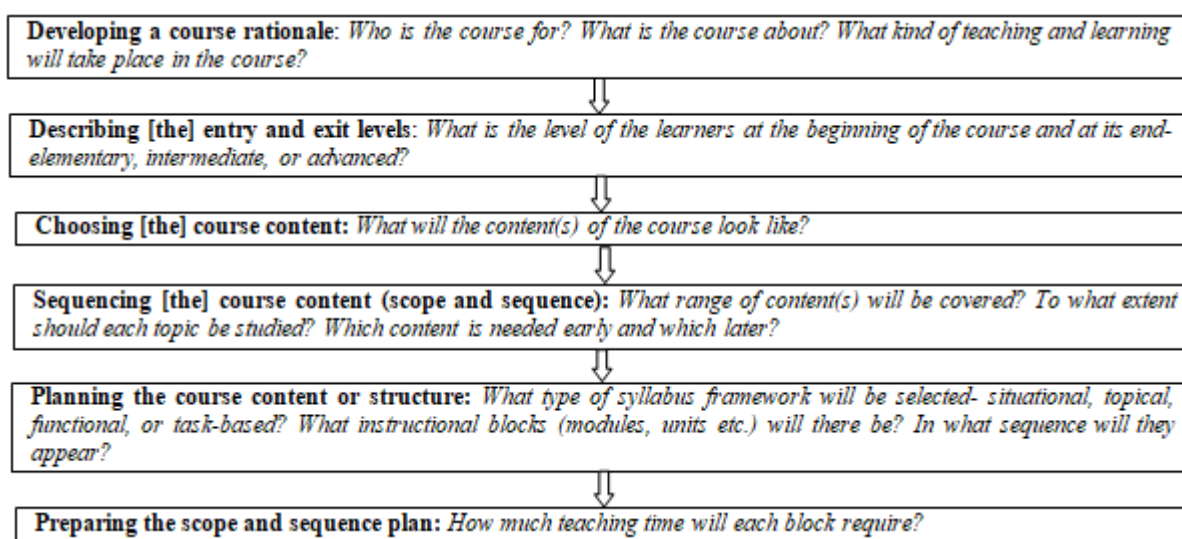
3. Discussion: Exploring Linkages between the Practice and the Theory

Upon sweeping through the literature related to language course designing, the present course comes close to two 'frameworks' proposed by Graves (2010) and Richards (2010). They are highlighted for the purpose of comparison below. The following framework (Figure 2) is proposed by Graves (2010).

Needs assessment: *What are my students' needs? How can I assess them so that I can address them?*

Determining goals and objectives: *What are the purposes and intended outcomes of the course? What will my students need to do or learn to achieve these goals?*

Conceptualizing content: *What will be the backbone of what I teach? What will I include in my syllabus?*

Selecting and developing materials and activities: *How and with what will I teach the course? What is my role? What are my students' roles?*

Organization of content and activities: *How will I organize the content and activities? What systems will I develop?*

Evaluation: *How will I assess what students have learned? How will I assess the effectiveness of the course?*

Consideration of resources and constraints: *What are the givens of my situation?*

Figure 2: A framework of language course design (Adapted from Graves, 1996, p.13)

Likewise, 'different levels of planning and development' of a language course or 'a set of instructional materials' are discussed in Richards (2010). They are presented in Figure 3.

Developing a course rationale: *Who is the course for? What is the course about? What kind of teaching and learning will take place in the course?*

Describing [the] entry and exit levels: *What is the level of the learners at the beginning of the course and at its end-elementary, intermediate, or advanced?*

Choosing [the] course content: *What will the content(s) of the course look like?*

Sequencing [the] course content (scope and sequence): *What range of content(s) will be covered? To what extent should each topic be studied? Which content is needed early and which later?*

Planning the course content or structure: *What type of syllabus framework will be selected- situational, topical, functional, or task-based? What instructional blocks (modules, units etc.) will there be? In what sequence will they appear?*

Preparing the scope and sequence plan: *How much teaching time will each block require?*

Figure 3: Levels of planning and developing a language course (Adapted from Richards, 2010, pp. 145-167)

By comparing the author's (+ his team) 'procedures' (Figure 1) with Graves's (2010) 'framework' (Figure 2) and Richard's (2010) 'levels' (Figure 3), more similarities than distinctions excepting a few terminological differences can be explored, although, as stated earlier, the author (+ his team) had not initially been guided by any pre-established theory or philosophy of course development.

As one examines the design of the **Bridge Course to Bachelors'**, a question is likely to arise: By definition, was it a curriculum, a syllabus or a course? Graves (2010) conceptualizes a curriculum as "the philosophy, purposes, design and implementation of a whole program". In contrast, she defines a syllabus as "the specification and ordering of content of a course or courses". Referring to Huchinson and Walters (1987), she defines a course as "integrated series of teaching-learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge" (p. 3).

Since the course was just a supplement to the whole rather than the whole programme itself, it was not a curriculum. It could not be defined as a syllabus, either because it was

more than simply a collection, selection and ordering of the contents. It was more like 'teaching-learning experiences…to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge' plus skills and proficiencies needed as a basis for learning in the future. In other words, it was a course rather than a curriculum or a syllabus. Therefore, as it occurs now, we were right in calling it a 'bridge course'.

Secondly, throughout the formation of this course the teachers had the key roles: from preliminary content providers to the shapers of the final draft of the design. Regarding the procedures to follow for this kind of endeavour, Graves (2010) remarks, "There is no set procedure to follow that will guarantee a successful course because each teacher and each teacher's situation is different. Put another way, there is no answer to give, but there is an answer to find."(p. 5). Then it comes to us now, the procedures were a right path to have been followed. Graves (2010) further corroborates, "The approach is the result of experience, not a condition for it." (p. 9). Since we had no one to give us the correct answer, we had attempted to find it

ourselves out of our own experience gained around our own situation(s).

Similarly, in Richards's (2010) words, "teachers too invest a great deal of their energies into planning language courses, preparing teaching materials and teaching their classes." (p. 1). Thus, as it comes now, what we had done as teachers was the thing teachers usually (need to) do.

Likewise, Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 9-10), regard 'understanding of learners' and 'understanding of curriculum and materials' as part of teacher development. In other words, as it occurs now, our project could be understood as part of our professional development.

Without much deliberation, we went into the actual students for information collection and involved them in expressing their views and opinions regarding their problems/difficulties in learning Compulsory English, which later turned to be a 'focus group discussion', a technique of collecting views and opinions from the participants. According to Tomlinson (1998), one of the basic principles of second language acquisition is "What is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful." (p. 10). In fact the students were first-hand beneficiaries, and the most authentic individuals who knew what the actual problems/difficulties were. Therefore, because the course had incorporated the information from the students, there is every space to claim that the course must have been relevant and useful for them.

Markee (1997) regards curriculum development as an innovation and views that the success of a course depends on answering a composite question: "who adopts what, where, when, why and how?" (p. 42-43). Our original attempt was congruent with her question because the answer to the 'composite question' was self-evident: the teachers who designed the course would adopt it to the classes they taught on the verge of the session for addressing the needs of the students learning English as a compulsory subject in general and, building confidence in them for the various aspects of learning English, thus bridging the gap between Higher Secondary level and Bachelor level' (Poudel, 2012 p. 4) using the 'instructional methods/ techniques' specified by the course.

As Graves (1996 p. 4) argues, the course development process is a broader concept of which planning is the first stage. In addition to planning, the development process involves teaching, modifying/re-planning and re-teaching the course. Indeed, the course was designed, not developed, because teaching, modifying/re-planning and re-teaching were beyond the scope of the project. Therefore, now it turns right that we used the term 'design', not 'develop'.

4. Reflection and Conclusion

In fact, the appropriate arbitrating of the interdisciplinary biases held by the representatives from the varying faculties was a paramount challenge throughout the course designing process. The challenge was successfully overcome through the patience of listening and acting with the openness of mind- a total sense of inclusion practised by the assignee.

To recall, I was assigned a project to design a bridge course to help the prospective students of Bachelor's level first year in Compulsory English. However, right from the beginning I, the assignee, collaborated with my colleagues and the real learners so that I (we) could come with the outcome as such- **A Bridge to Bachelors'**. Nonetheless, as it comes today, it would have been much better if the representation of the students had also been made to the extended meetings in order to ensure a greater degree of ownership of the stakeholders.

As the experience of the project suggests, we need not always seek a relevant theory or philosophy for solving every problem. We can get many things done through experience and reasoning, practice and collaboration without counting and accounting for theories and philosophies. Done in this way, the deeds can find their roots with a theory even later on because every theory finds its origin in the observation of the earth and the world rather than imported from another planet. Even if not, there will be something justifying our deeds, and that is pragmatist's theory or pragmatism! After all, a story teller/writer does not usually seek a well-founded theory of storytelling/writing in the beginning.

5. Acknowledgements

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