Fact sheet – Course design: Competency or proficiency

teaching issues 9

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Context

The Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP) curriculum, along with English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula generally, has undergone considerable changes over the past several decades. Although the AMEP has its origins in the early fifties it was not until the early eighties that AMEP descriptions of outcomes were formalised across Australia. Since then, two different approaches to assessment and curriculum design have been used nationally across the AMEP – proficiency based and competency based.

In the last decade, there have been substantial changes to the delivery environment. No longer are AMEP providers serving only AMEP learners. Currently, many providers form classes of students funded from both the AMEP and a number of other federal and state sources. Additionally, many providers deliver different curriculum approaches within the same organisation depending on the funding source. These changed circumstances have led to provider concerns about how to best serve their various clients within the same organisation or even class.

An additional complicating factor is that proficiency is used as the language measure for *placement* within the AMEP (using the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings – ISLPR), while competency is used as a measure of learner *achievement* in the programme (using the Certificates in Spoken and Written English – CSWE).

This fact sheet addresses the basis of curriculum design and the tension between proficiency-based and competency-based programmes.

The nature of curriculum and syllabus

While the two terms, curriculum and syllabus, have been used interchangeably in the ELT field, many writers differentiate between them. In the AMEP context, it is useful to make such a distinction as AMEP instruction is based on the CSWE which is a curriculum framework, not a syllabus. Syllabus design is left to providers at the local level where particular contexts and learners can be accommodated. The term *course design* is used in the title to reflect this.

Curricula

A variety of curricula have been used in English language teaching, both in the AMEP and internationally. The basis of curriculum design can be linguistic-based or subject-based.

Linguistic-based

A number of different approaches fall within linguistic-based curricula:

- Grammar-based approaches begin with sentence structures, such as tense, and vocabulary.

- Lexical approaches use lexical units as the building blocks for syllabus design. Such units include chunks and collocations. Choices for inclusion are based on extensive linguistic corpora such as COBUILD.

- Functional/notional approaches begin with the functions (such as apologising) that learners need to perform to be communicatively competent. In functional/notional approaches, the linguistic features taught are dictated by the function.

- Genre- or text-based approaches begin with text types (such as short recounts) that learners will need for the contexts in which they will use the language. While a number of teaching methodologies could be used in a text-based approach, this approach is most commonly used with explicit instruction of the linguistic features of the text and the staging that makes the text coherent. Texts can be oral or written, monologues or dialogues.

Subject-based

Similarly, a number of different approaches use subject matter as the basis for constructing a curriculum. This approach is usually called content-based instruction (CBI) and refers to the integration of content and language learning. The choice of language is dictated by the content. Content can be academic – for example, the subject matter required by another curriculum in schools or universities. It can also be vocational – that is, the content learners need for specific occupations. In adult ESL, the content is often survival content, such as going to the doctor or getting a job.

Another approach within CBI is theme-based, where the syllabus is designed around themes of interest to the learners – such as the environment – but not necessarily serving any other specific outcome.

Although most curricular frameworks have traditionally been associated with particular methodologies, they do not necessarily prescribe methodologies. CBI, for instance, can follow communicative methodologies or linguistic ones. Similarly, task-based learning can incorporate explicit teaching of grammatical structures as well as communicative tasks. Methodologies are the language-learning activities, tasks, subject matter and learning experiences selected by the teacher to facilitate learning. They are usually based on the teacher's theoretical assumptions about language, language learning and teacher and learner roles.

AMEP curriculum framework

A curriculum framework provides the theoretical underpinnings and the overarching framework for instruction, including learning objectives and, often, assessment and learning arrangement. A syllabus, on the other hand, provides content and strategies for achieving outcomes. It is a coherent course of study for specific learners with the scope and sequence determined by the curriculum framework.

We can therefore consider the current AMEP curriculum framework, the CSWE, to be 'contentless' and methodologically neutral, where the content, methodology and learning activities are developed locally, either by providers or individual teachers. While the CSWE does not specify a particular methodology, it does require the explicit teaching of the structure and features of texts through modelling, deconstruction, and scaffolded construction prior to independent construction by the learner. This teaching/learning cycle underpins the CSWE framework.

A proficiency perspective: ISLPR

As a response to the Galbally Report (1978), the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) were introduced to provide a common mechanism for describing outcomes of the AMEP programme. These ratings were based on language proficiency as a measure of student use of language, whether through formal instruction or informal learning. Proficiency scales set out to establish what learners should be able to do with language across various staged developmental levels. Most norm-referenced assessments, such as the International English Language Testing Scheme (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), adopt proficiency scales where the language targets can be acquired through a variety of ways. In 1997 the ASPLR became the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) because of its increasing use outside Australia.

Most proficiency-based assessments rate learners separately in the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Systems such as ISLPR and IELTS use criterion-referenced assessment – that is, learners are assessed against specific criteria, rather than rated against each other. The criteria are simple statements of performance, such as 'able to satisfy own simple everyday transactional needs and limited social needs' (Reading 1+). These simple statements are then extensively expanded to define the contexts, the types of texts or interactions, the types of grammatical features that should be present, and the level of understanding of genre and register the learner needs to perform to achieve the particular rating. The ratings also provide examples of language behaviour to guide assessors as well as comments, such as 'understanding depends, however, on there being significant controls over the input' (Reading 1+).

ISLPR is a twelve-level scale going from 0 to 5, where 5 is proficiency equivalent to 'that of a native speaker of the same socio-cultural variety'.

A competency perspective: CSWE

In the 1980s, the focus in the AMEP was on a learner-centred curriculum, variously implemented from a 'strong' version to a 'light' version. The strong version involved negotiating with learners all aspects of course content and methodology, while the light version involved teachers conducting a needs analysis with learners and developing content, materials and methodology based on this analysis. In 1986, the Federal Government commissioned a review of the AMEP which found that, although teachers supported the principles behind such a curriculum, in practice they found it placed tremendous demands on their time and expertise. The review also found that learners and teachers considered that such a curriculum did not provide continuity and progression across levels. A key

recommendation, therefore, was to develop curriculum guidelines with clear learner pathways – in other words, to reduce the reliance on teachers as curriculum developers and provide a less negotiated syllabus.

These issues were addressed at state level, where groups of teachers, working with curriculum coordinators, developed curricula for local use. Eventually, NSW Adult Migrant English Service (AMES) developed an integrated curriculum document which they trialled with their own teachers and learners and then had accredited within the Australian vocational education system. The Federal Government eventually adopted this curriculum framework for the entire AMEP. This framework is the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) – the current framework for the AMEP nationally – against which learners and providers are currently measured.

The CSWE curriculum framework adopts a competency-based and text-based approach. Competency approaches to curriculum design are the basis for the vocational education and training sector in Australia – the sector in which the CSWE is accredited. This approach requires learners to demonstrate learning achievements by performing real-world tasks, usually in simulated situations. To be assessed as competent, learners need to be able to perform all aspects of the task. In the vocational sector in which this approach is situated, it is reasonable to expect that an electrician can perform all stages in rewiring a house or a mechanic perform all stages in wheel alignment. Such an approach becomes more problematic, however, when applied to communication where not all stages in an interaction or text type are necessarily compulsory.

The second theoretical foundation of the CSWE, a text-based approach, is based on systemic functional grammar – a social theory of language in which language description takes the appropriate unit of analysis as whole text in its sociocultural context, as opposed to a sentence or utterance.

The current version of the CSWE melds this text-based approach with learning outcomes, rather than competencies. Outcomes-based education has a long history in general education, where it has had very specific approaches to defining and assessing outcomes (see, for example, Spady 1993). Within the CSWE, learning outcomes are defined as 'what an individual can do' with language. However, it can be argued that the learning outcomes described in the CSWE still take a competency-based approach in that the assessment criteria are described as whole texts with specific, required and optional elements. To achieve a particular learning outcome, learners need to meet all the required criteria within the specified conditions of assessment (such as length of text).

A competency perspective: The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)

The CLB is also competency-based (that is, it identifies what learners are able to do), task-based (having learners perform tasks to demonstrate proficiency), and text-based (using texts rather than discrete linguistic items as measures of proficiency). CLB, however, differs from the CSWE in that it is not a curriculum framework, but a scale of English proficiency. It differs in the way teachers assess whether learners have met the competency.

Genres are described generally (for example, Writing Benchmark 7: 'Convey a personal message in a formal short letter or note, or through email, expressing or responding to appreciation, complaint, disappointment, satisfaction, dissatisfaction and hope'). Instead of required elements, CLB uses Performance Indicators (for example Addresses the purpose of the task; Expresses main ideas and supports them with details). These Performance Indicators do not indicate every element that might be in a particular genre or text, but rather convey descriptions of what one would expect a particular text to do.

Each benchmark includes competency in four distinct areas:

- social interaction
- reproducing information
- business/service messages
- presenting information and ideas.

The CLB, therefore, differs significantly from CSWE assessment since, while based on outcomes or competencies, measures them in terms of language proficiency.

Issues

Student placement
Learners in the AMEP are placed in specific classes based on a number of factors. Learners new to the AMEP are assessed using the ISLPR, a proficiency-based assessment. They are also interviewed and their previous educational experiences ascertained. They are then assigned to courses at one of the four CSWE levels based on their scoring on the ISLPR. Courses are:

- A Course in Preliminary Spoken and Written English – students with no previous exposure to English or with very limited skills
- CSWE I – ISLPR 0
- CSWE II – ISLPR 1
- CSWE III – ISLPR 1+

Additionally, because learners come to the AMEP with diverse previous experiences, within each certificate level, learners can be assigned to one of three bands:

- Band A: slow pace for those with limited formal education or low literacy in their first language

- Band B: average pace for those with some learning strategies and education (at secondary level) in their home country

- Band C: fast pace for those with high levels of learning strategies and some post-secondary education (see Annotated Bibliography below for NSW AMES *Certificates in Spoken and Written English* for complete details of levels and bands).

Students who have completed a CSWE level may progress to the next level. Those who have completed only some of the outcomes for that certificate will remain in a course at that level. Thus, in any one AMEP class at a specific Certificate level, there will be learners with the appropriate ISLPR, those who have completed the previous level Certificate and those who have completed some of the learning outcomes for the current Certificate course in which they are enrolled. This recognition of different types of prior learning means they have acquired different linguistic skills and in different contexts. Teachers, therefore, need to have a firm understanding of the language achievements of all of their learners.

Our examination of the degree of mapping of the ISLPR and the CSWE learning outcomes indicates that learners placed through any of the three processes will have gaps. Learners who have completed the compulsory learning outcomes in the CSWE may not have reached the equivalent ISLPR proficiency level. This is to be expected, given that proficiency-based assessments differ from competency-based ones.

A national curriculum

As a result of the Campbell report (1986), the national CSWE curriculum was introduced. Not only did this address the issue of learner pathways, it also provided the funder – the Department of Immigration and Citizenship – with an accountability measure. Through the national curriculum framework learning outcomes, DIAC can measure learner progress. However, not only instruction but many variables affect learner progress. As well as learners' previous schooling experience and literacy, other factors such as trauma or the exigencies of the settlement process can affect learning. Additionally, such accountability is premised on teachers' assessments being valid and reliable.

Assessing learner competence

A criticism of the learner-centred, classroom and teacher assessment of proficiency was that such assessments were not objective. It was claimed that competency-based assessment was more objective since the elements of the text were clearly delineated for teachers. Since it is an 'all or nothing' assessment, there should be no subjectivity. However, all forms of criterion-referenced assessment require professional judgment, whether they are proficiency- or competency-based. Both the ISLPR and the CSWE use training of raters to ensure norming of assessors. NSW AMES, the developers of the CSWE, conduct national moderation, and the National Working Group in conjunction with the AMEP Research Centre moderates and trials assessment tasks (nationally available on the web) along with their assessment criteria. However, teachers exercise their professional judgment *in situ* as to whether a learner has met the criteria fully. In proficiency scales, such judgments can lead to movements on the scale. Since competencies are not scaled, teachers have a bi-polar choice only. Some outcomes-based assessments, such as those advocated by professional organisations (for example, Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages in their standards documents), provide levels of performance of the learning outcome – often a three-point scale of: 'approaches standard', 'meets standards', or 'exceeds standard'.

A number of studies conducted by the AMEP Research Centre (Brindley 2001) have shown that CSWE assessments have low reliability when administered under certain conditions. These studies suggest that a) assessments of a single task by a single rater are highly unreliable and b) experienced CSWE assessors do not consistently agree on the classification of texts as achieved or not achieved.

Multiple learner outcomes

In many adult English language classrooms in Australia, AMEP-funded learners are in the same class as learners funded through other sources – whether by the Commonwealth of Australia (for example, Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme) or by the state. These other funding agencies require different measures of student learning. Thus, while teachers can use the CSWE as a framework for instruction, they need to conduct different assessments for different learners. In some states, institutions map CSWE learning outcomes onto their local or state-mandated curriculum. As we have seen in our mapping of the ISLPR and the CSWE Learning Outcomes, such mappings are rarely completely aligned (see NCELTR website referenced in the Annotated Bibliography below for this mapping).

Classroom implications

For teachers to both teach and assess their learners in the context described above requires a high level of professionalism which can only be achieved through ongoing professional development. Such professional development needs to include a grounding in assessment – both proficiency-based and competency-based – as well as the management of assessment.

If we expect providers, and therefore teachers, to be accountable for student learning, we also need to better understand the validity of the CSWE. To date, there have been no validation studies of the CSWE so this question remains unanswered. There is no evidence available concerning the construct validity of the CSWE as a curriculum framework. It therefore remains unclear whether or not the CSWE can be said to reflect current understandings of language ability and language use. In terms of content validity, although the CSWE was designed to reflect the language learning needs of the population for whom it is intended, no studies have been conducted to determine if this is in fact the case.

Annotated bibliography

Bottomley, Y., Dalton, J., & Corbel, C. (1994). *From proficiency to competencies*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This volume reports on a research project funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs that documents the introduction of the competency-based CSWE curriculum framework in the Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES) in Victoria. It describes how AMES teachers worked through curriculum change as they moved from the proficiency-oriented ASLPR to the competency-based CSWE.

Brindley, G. (Ed.). (2001). *Studies in immigrant English language assessment*. (Vol.1). Sydney: NCELTR.

Brindley, G. & Burrows, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Studies in immigrant English language assessment*. (Vol. 2). Sydney: NCELTR.

These two volumes include several studies conducted by the National Centre for English Language teaching and Research (NCELTR) on assessment within the CSWE curriculum framework.

Campbell, W. J. (1986). *Towards active voice*. Report of the Committee of Review of the Adult Migrant Education Program. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

This review was the impetus for a move from a negotiated syllabus to a more systematic curriculum that provided learners (and teachers) with pathways across language levels. It also led ultimately to the adoption of a national curriculum framework used to measure learners and providers.

Galbally, F. (1978). *Migrant services and programmes: Report of post-arrival programmes and services for migrants*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

This review of the AMEP led to a wide range of post-arrival services for adult immigrants, including unlimited entitlements to free educational and settlement services. Provision of English tuition was considered basic to successful settlement. The assurance of stable funding led to the professionalisation of the teaching force in the AMEP.

Murray, D. E. (2005). AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 5. *Vocational training and the AMEP*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre.

This fact sheet describes how vocational content can be incorporated into the AMEP CSWE curriculum. It discusses the issues around trying to develop such content-based courses.

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) website: http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/

The NCELTR website, AMEP Professional Connections page, contains links to a literature review of curriculum design and mapping of CSWE outcomes to ISLPR proficiency levels.

New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service (2003). *Certificates in Spoken and Written English* (4th ed.). Sydney: NSW AMES.

The curriculum framework is available through NSW AMES. As well as providing the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, the document includes a detailed description of the theoretical bases of the curriculum.

Nunan, D. (1987). *The teacher as curriculum developer*. Adelaide: National Curriculum Research Centre.

This book describes the role and function of teachers in a learner-centred curriculum. It demonstrates how teachers need to develop considerable expertise to work in such a system and how they also need to be provided with sufficient time and resources to develop curricula at the classroom level.

Spady, W. (1993). *Outcome-based education*. Belconnen: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.

This document provides details of how to develop curricula that are outcomes based.

Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages website: http://www.tesol.org/assoc/

The TESOL website hosts information about the various standards projects that TESOL has sponsored over the past decade, both learner standards and teacher standards. These standards all take a performance-based or outcomes-based approach. Included in all these standards are indicators of student learning.

Williams, A. (2004). Fact sheet – Teaching issues 3: *Enhancing language teaching with content*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre.

This fact sheet describes the nature of content-based instruction (CBI), possible topics useful for AMEP clients, and factors that teachers need to take into account in applying CBI.

Willis, D. (1990). *The lexical syllabus: A new approach to language teaching*. London: Collins COBUILD.

This volume describes in detail the lexical approach to syllabus design. The lexical basis for the syllabus is the COBUILD database of language corpora.

Yates, L. (2005). AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 4: *Generic skills*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre

This fact sheet describes the nature of generic skills and what teachers in the AMEP can do to help learners acquire the generic skills essential for their workplace participation. Many of these generic skills are part of Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector training packages.

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