Performance-Based Approaches to the Design of ESL Instruction

The Objectives Movement

It was the objectives movement that ushered in a behavioral (or as it was soon to be called, 'performance') approach to education. This movement has been very influential and highly contentious, both in general education, and also in language education. Most of the controversy has to do with the use of behavioral (or as they soon came to be called), performance objectives.

During the early sixties we talked about behavior rather than about performance. This turned out to be an unfortunate choice of terms. A number of people were put off by the word, thinking that objectives necessarily had to do with behaviorism or with behaviorists. Not so. Objectives describe performance, or behavior, because an objective is specific rather than broad or general and because performance, or behavior, is what we can be specific about. (Mager,1984). Objectives have been characterized in a number of different ways. Valette and Disick (1972) suggest they should stress output rather than input and that such output should be specified in terms of performance. It has been suggested that articulating precise statements of what the learner is to be able to do at the end of a course is an essential step in the curriculum design process, because it greatly facilitates a number of other steps. In the field of general education, the work of Mager (1962, 1984) and Dick and Carey (1978) in North America, and Rowntree (1981) in the United Kingdom, was particularly influential.

Mager, and Dick and Carey sit squarely within the 'systems' approach to education first championed by Tyler (1948), and the cornerstone of their approach was the articulation of goals that were then elaborated as objectives. The key characteristic of a behavioral objective is that it describes what the learner rather than the teacher is to do. It may seem obvious that the instructional process should focus on the learner, but even today it is possible to find programs with objectives for the teacher of the program such as: "To review the simple past" or "To teach prepositions of place".

It is possible for objectives such as these to be achieved without any learning taking place. Another characteristic of a behavioral objective is that it must specify observable learner behavior. "To appreciate Shakespeare's historical plays" is not a performance objective because the behavior is invisible. One cannot see 'appreciation' or 'understanding'. Mager lists the following words as being 'dangerous' because they do not describe observable behavior and are open to many interpretations: 'to know', 'to understand', 'the really understand', 'to appreciate', 'to fully appreciate', 'to grasp the significance of', 'to enjoy', 'to believe', 'to have faith in', 'to internalize'. Formal performance objectives are meant to include three elements: a 'performance' or 'task' statement, a 'conditions' statement, and a 'standards' or 'criterion' statement. The task element specifies what learners are to do, the conditions statement specifies the circumstances and conditions under which learners are to perform the task, and the standards statement specifies how well the task is to be performed. The following statements illustrate three-part objectives.

In a classroom role play (condition), learners will exchange personal information (task). Four pieces of information will be exchanged (standard), and utterances will be comprehensible to someone unused to dealing with a second language speaker (standard). In an authentic interaction (condition), the student will request prices of shopping items (task). Utterances will be comprehensible to a sympathetic native speaker (standard).

In objectives driven curricula, conditions and standards have an important bearing on difficulty, and a given task can be made more or less difficult by varying the conditions under which the learners will perform, and the standards they are expected to reach. These include both (1) the degree to which the language event is embedded in a context which facilitates comprehension, and (2) the degree to which the language event makes cognitive demands on the learner.

Objectives-driven curricula were heavily criticized in the 1970s. Criticisms included the idea that trivial learning behaviors are the easiest to operationalize, hence the really important outcomes of education will be under emphasized. In addition, many people feel that pre-specification of precise objectives prevents the teacher from taking advantage of instructional opportunities occurring unexpectedly in the classroom. It has also been noted that outcomes other than behavior change are important in education. In terms of language teaching, an additional criticism relates to the creative nature of language proficiency. Proficient language users know multiple ways of achieving communicative ends through language, and therefore identifying objectives *a priori*, or the standards that indicate how well the objective has been met, may be problematic. Another problem is that, taken to its logical conclusion, the approach spawns hundreds of detailed, micro-level performance statements. Finally, despite the emphasis on objectives in teacher education programs in the 1970s, they failed to take root

in teachers' practices. Most teachers are trained to plan instruction by specifying behavioral objectives… While this prescriptive model of planning may be one of the most consistently taught features of teacher education programs, the model is consistently not used in teachers' planning in schools. Obviously, there is a mismatch between the demands of the classroom and the prescriptive planning model.

Despite these criticisms, objectives, used appropriately, did bring tangible benefits to the learning process. In work cited in my 1988 book on curriculum, the use of objectives, when conveyed to learners in ways that made sense to them, played an important part in sensitizing learners to what it is to be a language learner. In particular, learners came to have a more realistic idea of what could be achieved in a given course. Learning came to be seen as the gradual accretion of achievable goals. Learners developed greater sensitivity to their role as language learners and their vague notions of what it is to be a learner became much sharper. Self-evaluation became more feasible. Classroom activities could be seen to relate to real-life needs. Development of skills was seen as a gradual rather than all-or-nothing process.

The Competency-based Language Teaching Movement

During the 1980s, competency-based instruction developed as an alternative to the use of objectives in program planning. As with the objectives movement, Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT) focuses on what learners should be able to do at the conclusion of a course (as opposed, for example, to the specification of content).   Competencies are also generally couched at a higher level of generality than performance objectives. There are therefore fewer of them, and they enable the development of more coherent programs.

Competency based training is concerned with the attainment and demonstration of specified skills, knowledge, and application to minimum specified standards rather than with an individual's achievement relative to that of others in a group. It is 'criterion-referenced' rather than 'norm-referenced'. According to Reynolds and Salter (1995), performance-based approaches to competence can be placed into one of three categories. The first of these … …regards competence as a list or combination of discrete parts. Tasks are analysed into components and each component part is stated as desired behaviour. A competent teacher is one who can perform the behaviours involved in the pre specified tasks. The second model focuses on the ability to transfer previous learning to new situations. The third model looks at competence as the application of a combination of knowledge, understanding, experience and executive ability to task performance in specific contexts.

Standards are an important dimension to CBLT. A standard is "A level or a measure of acceptable achievement that is a benchmark. A precise statement of performance/outcome required in respect of the task and reflecting the application of the skills and knowledge necessary to that performance outcome." CBLT first emerged in the US in the 1970s and was widely adopted in vocationally-oriented education and in adult ESL programs. By the end of the 1980s CBLT had come to be accepted as "the state-of-the-art approach to adult ESL by national policymakers and leaders in curriculum development (Auerbach 1984).

The following is an example of a competency statement:
The learner can negotiate complex/problematic spoken exchanges for personal business and community purposes. He or she: achieves purpose of exchange and provides all essential information accurately uses appropriate staging, e.g. opening and closing strategies provides and requests information as required explains circumstances, causes, consequences, and proposes solutions as required sustains dialogue e.g. using feedback, turn taking; uses grammatical forms and vocabulary appropriate to topic and register and grammatical errors do not interfere with meaning pronunciation/stress/intonation do not impede intelligibility interprets gestures and other paralinguistic features.

As can be seen from the above, competencies bear a strong family resemblance to performance objectives and reside squarely within the behavioral tradition. From the example above, it can be seen that competencies contain a task and a number of 'how well' statements – ('achieves purpose of exchange', 'provides all essential information accurately', uses appropriate staging', 'errors do not interfere with meaning', 'pronunciation is intelligible'). However, as already been noted, one difference is the level of generality in which each is couched, objectives being more specific than competencies. It is also interesting to compare the supposed benefits of CBLT with those listed above for performance objectives.

Teachers' and learners' attention becomes more focused on language as a tool for communication rather than on language knowledge as an end in itself. Assessment is integrated into the learning process through the use of attainment targets that are directly linked to course content and objectives. Learners are able to obtain useful diagnostic feedback on their progress and achievement since explicit criteria are provided against which they can compare their performances.

In Europe, the most ambitious attempt at applying a performance approach to the design and development of language programs has come from the Council of Europe. In fact, the very first documents emerging from their work make explicit the ideology underlying their work, stating that this work … tries to specify foreign language ability as a *skill* rather than *knowledge*. It analyzes what the learner will have to be able to *do* in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what *language-forms* (words, structures, etc.) the learners will have to be able to handle in order to *do* all that has been specified. In accordance with the nature of verbal communication as a form of behaviour the objectives defined by means of [our] model are therefore *behavioural* objectives.

Beyond CBI: The Standards Movement

One influential current trend in performance-based curriculum development is the 'standards' movement. While this is receiving most of its momentum in the United States, where it is around ten years old, it is also popular elsewhere. It is the latest iteration of the behavioral approach to instructional design, and thus has close links with both the objectives movement and the competency movement. The strong family resemblance can be seen in the work that has been done in other subject areas such as Math and Language Arts. For example, the NCTE standards document for English language arts states: "By content standards, we mean statements that define what students should know and be able to do." Again, the principal difference is the level of generality at which the performance statements are couched.

Here are two examples of Language Arts Standards:
Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience. Students adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

In terms of the characterization given in the discussion of performance objectives, the first of these examples is a task, while the second is a standard.

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