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Backward Design Method in Foreign Language Curriculum Development

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Abstract

In this paper the authors focus their main attention on the need for improvement of curriculum planning within the course “Foreign Language”. The article presents the topicality, purposes and stages of a foreign technology called “backward design process” as the innovative method of foreign language curriculum development. It highlights the main characteristics of the stages, reveals both advantages and difficulties that may occur during the application of backward design technology within Russian higher education system. The authors give the brief characteristics of current state of language training in National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University and describe achievements and problems based on the experience gained.

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1. Introduction

One of the crucial stages in any education process is planning of curriculum, which represents the course (discipline, elective) in the contracted form. Today, when designing a curriculum, higher education institutions adhere to state educational standards, which are approved and recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and which serve as a basis for curriculum development. It should also be noted

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that current curricula are supposed to consider a wide range of factors, from the geographic region to the possibility of innovative technologies implementation.

As a rule, curriculum design implies making a plan of activities, formulating general provisions, determining the goals, etc. Traditionally, the first and most important stage in the development of Foreign Language curriculum is collecting resource materials in compliance with the set goals, identified educational activities and approved standards. It is worth noting that the current curricula rather meet the requirement of the Ministry, university and potential employers than satisfy the needs of students. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the process of curriculum planning and make it scientifically based. This is a critical issue of today when the requirements to the university graduates are becoming more and more stringent. As a result, the curricula need regular revision and the learning process should be continually improved. It seems to be quite important to find new approaches to curriculum planning, which will allow considering the needs of particular students.

Backward design is one of the innovative approaches to curriculum development and lesson planning. The method was introduced by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and is widely used in western countries. The authors suppose that backward design may also be efficiently implemented in Foreign Language curriculum planning at Russian higher education institutions.

2. Method description

Backward design implies three stages:

1. Identifying desired outcomes;
2. Determining acceptable assessment evidence;
3. Learning plan experience.

The first step is to formulate the program outcomes and identify the skills that the student is to acquire by the course completion. However, the content of the educational program should adhere to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. Therefore, the desired outcomes and the Ministry requirements to the Foreign Language curriculum need to be overlapping. The principal difficulty that educators and curriculum designers typically encounter is the large amount of information to be learnt within the limited number of academic hours. In this regard, it is vitally important to set the priorities, which allows not only obtaining desired outcomes but also taking into account the standards approved by the Ministry and the university.

Foreign Language as an academic subject has great potential in terms of education, development, and communication goals. One of the basic requirements of the content of the Foreign Language education program is use of authentic materials. These resources are supposed to represent samples of natural speech and acquaint the students with typical rules of native speakers' behavior and particularities of their culture.

Let us implement the backward design method to authenticity of educational resources. As the authors of the method say, to take into account this or that requirement in the process of curriculum development, it is necessary to give precise answers to the following two questions: what knowledge will the student have obtained by the end of the course? What will the student be able to do based on the knowledge obtained? The answers to these questions are program outcomes. In the perspective of Russian education and in terms of resource authenticity, the answer to the first question is development of socio-cultural competence. As for the second question, this knowledge on native speakers' culture will make it possible for the student to be aware of traditions, to estimate the situation and choose the appropriate behaviour strategy, which, in its turn, ensures successful cross-cultural interaction.

The suggested answers are possible options, the number of which is unlimited. The curriculum designer or educator can identify as many learning outcomes as he/she supposes to be necessary, with due regard to the level of students, as well as to their interests and needs. This is an undoubtable advantage of the method as it allows getting the balance right between adhering to the state standards and satisfying students' needs.

The second stage is to determine acceptable assessment evidence, in other words, to develop the control procedure. How can we know that the student has achieved the desired outcomes? What will be the evidence of successful development of this or that competence? These questions are key issues in the efficiency assessment of the teacher's activity. In the opinion of Wiggins and McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), when planning a curriculum, it is more important to think about learning outcomes assessment than to speculate on the number of units and topics to study. In accordance with the technique suggested, the control procedure, assessment forms and

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