

Learning Outcome Number 5 – Principles of Course Design

Introduction

This is a reflection upon the process I took in designing my very first course in MTSL 510 entitled “Vocational English.” It describes my rationale for decisions and my newfound perspective on course design. I will highlight several key sections including the following: needs assessment, course goals and objectives, and formative and summative assessments.

Needs Assessment

When creating the initial needs assessments, I felt it important that they accomplish multiple objectives simultaneously. Not only did the activities assess the macroskills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but they also assessed group dynamics which I wanted to determine early on so that I could tailor my future lesson plans and materials. For instance, how students interact during a “class mind map” will reveal certain aspects of their communication, abilities, and preferences. On the other hand, “Find Someone Who...” demonstrates one-on-one interaction which I can also formatively monitor for pragmatic assessment. My second activity, “Introductory Needs Assessment” provides insight into writing abilities and also helps students to consider for themselves their own goals for the class. This assessment elicits valuable demographic information and an understanding of how the students view learning and language. The data I gain from each of these activities will be rich in information and direct me moving forward when eventually rolled out in a “live” classroom environment. This concept is suggested by Graves (2000) as she asserts that a “needs assessment is a systematic and ongoing process of gathering information about students’ needs and preferences, interpreting the information, and then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the needs (p. 98).” Another idea that was further reinforced by Graves is the importance of ongoing reassessment of needs. As the design of the course progressed, I decided to add a mid-course evaluation as a formal tool to evaluate progress and to determine if any adjustments to the course content should be made. This would be in addition to the formative, everyday assessment. This entire process highlighted for me the importance of continual assessment and the need for flexible, responsive instruction.

Course Goals & Objectives

As I was planning goals and objectives for this Vocational English course, I was reminded several times of Graves’ (2000) statement that “because class time is limited, and the number of goals is not, choice is important (p. 75).” I found that determining my goals and objectives was a way to keep myself more or less “accountable” as I made decisions in selecting course materials, determining my course outline, and choosing appropriate formative and summative assessments. Without clear and concise course and objectives closely tied to my course context, all of these other aspects of the course would not have been as cohesive. This is in line with the concept of backward design: according to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), “having a clear goal helps to focus our planning and guide purposeful action toward the intended result (p. 19). This was contrary to the more traditional concept of course design that I originally expected.

Formative & Summative Assessments

In determining the formative and summative assessment activities, I began by designing the summative assessment. The Workplace Topic Presentation achieved several course goals and objectives. Not only does it help students learn how to present in the workplace (including appropriate body language, eye contact, intonation, and content organization), it also increases their knowledge socioculturally as they will be able to select a topic of interest of to them. Working backwards from this assessment, the formative assessment then provides scaffolding as a way to practice organizing content and presenting information to others. Establishing the rubric for an oral presentation was a new experience for me. I referred to Brown and Abeywickrama's (2010) guidelines for effective scoring of oral presentations. They recommend that assessment must do the following: "a) specify the criterion, b) set appropriate tasks, c) elicit optimal output, and d) establish practical, reliable scoring procedures (Brown & Abeywickrama, p. 219)." The authors continue to discuss that the washback effect of effective scoring can be enhanced with follow up such as with qualitative feedback from the teacher in writing or with a conference (p. 220). I agreed with that concept and decided to add both of those ideas to the summative assessment.

Conclusion

The experience of building an entire course was extremely beneficial for me as an MA-TESL student. To take the concepts I had read and apply them prepared me to enter the classroom as a teacher. I can now speak from experience and more fully recognize what Graves means when she refers to course design as a "systems approach" and how all the parts are interrelated. Every decision I made was based upon the course context and course goals and objectives. For instance, if I made a change to one of those, it resulted in changes to course materials and most likely in assessments as well. Additionally, I now see the value in utilizing backward design when developing my course and starting with identifying the desired results rather than beginning with methods and activities.

As I become more experienced as an ESL instructor and teach a course multiple times, I will continue to make adjustments to account for changes in course context, the particulars of my students, as well as changes in the field. Over time, my teaching beliefs will also continue to develop as I learn more from experience. I am inspired by the idea that with each new class I will have an opportunity to assess my students needs and strengths by getting to know them as individuals, and then in turn use my creativity and experience to design the course most impactful for the context.

References

- Brown, H. D. & Abeywickrama, P. (2010). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Graves, K. (2000). *Designing language courses: A guide for teachers*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J (2005). *Understanding by design*. (2nd ed.) Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.