Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers

Kathleen Graves (2000)
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Designing Language Courses comprises 10 chapters on various aspects of course design, including “Assessing Needs,” “Formulating Goals and Objectives,” “Developing Materials,” and “Adapting a Textbook,” as well as the perhaps less predictable topic of “Articulating Beliefs” (i.e., the teacher’s own beliefs about language teaching and learning). While the chapters appear in an order which, with a couple of exceptions, reflects a fairly conventional sequence of processes of course design, the writer points out in her first chapter that she thinks in terms of a “systems approach” to the activity; she regards the various elements of course design as an interrelated and systematic whole, what she calls a “framework” for course design, where “as a course designer, you can begin anywhere in the framework, as long as it makes sense to you to begin where you do” (p. 3). Graves feels that conventional writing on course design views the process as a highly organized, linear one, in contrast to the “messy, multi-faceted, two-steps-forward, one-step-back process” which she herself experienced in designing courses and which she feels is the reality for the majority of teachers.
So this is no do-it-by-numbers instruction manual in course design; rather it is a book where the writer expresses her thoughts on course design—sometimes at considerable length, as the page count indicates—and where comments and materials from other teachers also frequently appear. It is intended to be thought-provoking, to get teachers to assess the ideas presented and compare these interactively with their own ideas, which may change and develop as a result. In the words of the preface by Donald Freeman, the editor of the TeacherSource series, of which this book is a part:

As a reader, you will find this book has a personality; it is not anonymous. It comes as a story, not as a directive, and it is meant to create a relationship with you rather than assume your attention. As a practitioner, it provides a sounding board for your ideas and a metric for your own thinking, and you can take from it what you will, and not tell you what to think; it is meant to help you make sense of what you do. (pp. ix-x)

All of this sounds very positive. It also, perhaps, sounds very pedagogical, and it may come as no surprise by now to discover that the book is based largely on courses which the author has given on course design, as well as on her own experience as teacher and text-book writer. Furthermore, it is intended to be used by teachers working in groups: “I . . . strongly recommend that you work with a partner or in a group of three or four” (p. 11). The book contains recurring features which are very training-course-like:

Each chapter includes three elements . . . frameworks, teachers’ voices, and investigations. The frameworks provide information and guidelines about what I think is important for teachers to know about each of the processes. The teachers’ voices provide reflections on how they carried out the processes, the dilemmas they faced, the decisions they made. . . . The investigations are a combination of reflective tasks which require thinking and responding to a question, a framework or a curriculum product; problem-solving tasks which require you to arrive at a solution that makes sense to you; and product tasks which ask you to design a curriculum product. [-1-]

In effect, the investigations ask you to “co-author” the book by questioning and adding your own examples. (p. 10)

In short, this book is probably best viewed as a teacher training course for groups rather than a resource book for individual teachers. It is probably most suitable for teachers with some experience; teachers with no classroom teaching behind them might find that they had too little basis for providing their own input. On the other hand, teachers with substantial experience might find the lengthy discovery learning approach somewhat frustrating for what they got out of it.

Considered as a training course textbook, then, what are the strengths and weaknesses of...

The course instructor who selects this book will have to live with the strong (though ever friendly and reasonable) voice of Kathleen Graves. The book is not designed explicitly for use with a course instructor; Graves is the instructor/leader in running the discussion elements of the course, and perhaps also in re-presenting and sometimes adding to the materials in each chapter; but it is likely to be a more limited role than some instructors will be used to. That is a bit of work, since it not only contains plenty of materials for group discussion, but also provides...
The ideas presented represent the often strongly held views of the author, but they are not wildly unconventional views, and the design of the book allows plenty of room for disagreement to be expressed. For example, on developing materials, Graves writes:

"Materials development takes place on a continuum of decision-making and creativity which ranges from being given a textbook and a timetable in which to “cover it”—least responsibility and decision-making—to developing all the materials you will use in class “from scratch”—most responsibility and creativity. Neither extreme is desirable. When teachers are required to strictly adhere to a textbook and timetable there is little room for them to make decisions and to put to use what they have learned from experience, which, in effect, “deskills” the teacher. . . . On the other hand, the majority of teachers are not paid or do not have the time in their schedules to develop all the materials for every course they teach." (p. 149)

Surely few in the mainstream of teaching would disagree here that “neither extreme is desirable,” and while some might incline to preferences at one end of the continuum or the other, all would find their views covered to some extent in the chapters on developing materials and adapting a textbook. Graves herself appears to favour more rather than less teacher input (perhaps this is only natural in someone writing a book for teachers on course design!), and I can find little recognition that materials developed by teachers, while they may gain by fitting in more closely to what the teacher thinks the students need, may also lose through being poorly and over-hastily worked out. But that is a point that could easily come up in the discussion prompted by this chapter, and no-one could accuse Graves of being extreme in her stated or implied views. [-2-]

If Graves is unlikely to offend by being too controversial, she may occasionally be open to the accusation of being rather bland. Her language is easy to understand, but sometimes I found it quite hard to concentrate on the longer discursive sections in the book. I cannot quote a lengthy passage to make my point, but consider this brief extract, which comes at the conclusion of a short section defining exercises (more controlled output) and activities (more open-ended output):

"When developing materials it is important to have a balance of activities and exercises. Too many exercises and too few activities will impede development of the ability to communicate in the real world, while too many activities and not enough exercises will deny students the opportunity to develop the language and skills they need to communicate effectively." (p. 157)

It’s a perfectly reasonable point, of course, but it’s not exactly expressed in a way that gets the pulse racing, nor yet in a way that really encourages the reader to ask, “Is the balance of exercises and activities right in the courses I’m teaching/designing?” I actually feel that this particular point, like others in the book, is in considerable need of expansion, while other sections could be substantially trimmed. But this is where a good course leader may come in, promoting further discussion of relevant points in relation to individuals’ teaching situations. And in fairness, it cannot be expected that the book will cover everything in depth; after all, the general subject of course design links to virtually any topic you care to mention in the field of language learning and teaching.

So there are some parts of the book that it can be quite hard to plod through. But I have to admit that in many cases it’s worth the effort. There were definitely times as I read when I thought, “Do I do this sort of planning as much as I should?” or, “How would doing this help in teaching my current groups?” The wealth of materials provided for discussion, many of the
design, do provoke thought and comment. Take the chapter on “Designing an Assessment Plan” for example. It begins by stressing that assessment “plays three interrelated and overlapping roles in course design: . . . assessing needs, . . . assessing students’ learning, and . . . evaluating the course itself” (p. 207). Assessing needs is considered mainly in a separate chapter; this particular chapter relates to assessment of what students have learned or are learning, and to course evaluation. The fact that these two types of assessment are considered together means that we do not lose sight of the fact that the success of a course is judged by what students feel they have learned. It is an approach that contrasts with the more traditional division into “testing” and “course evaluation.” Examples of teachers’ assessment plans for actual courses, while often lengthy, introduce forms of assessment that may be new to some readers, in particular forms which involve the students in assessing their own progress. The ways in which assessment is to be presented to students also forms an interesting topic for discussion. Descriptions of problems which actually came up in the implementation of the assessment plans prevent the material from being of the “look, this is how to do it” type. More conventional forms of assessment are not scorned, though the reader who is looking for instructions on how to create multiple choice tests will need to go elsewhere.

There is no index to the book, and that is a problem for anyone who wishes to use the book for reference. I’ve found it frustratingly difficult trying to look up “what does Graves have to say about X?” for this review, and there would be other occasions where one would want to find something in the book quickly and easily. I appreciate that to some extent “it’s not that sort of book,” but nevertheless I feel that books for teachers shouldn’t be designed in such a way that you have to re-read large sections to search for specific bits of information.

If you’re a teacher educator who will be running a series of seminars on course design, have your students to buy it if you like the style and approach. If you’re fairly new to teaching and looking elsewhere. If you’re an experienced teacher looking for some quick and interesting inspiration, this may be too much of a mouthful, with too much that is already familiar territory. If you are a teacher who doesn’t want to sign up for a full-time in-service course in curriculum development, but who would like a structured framework within which to discuss teaching issues regularly with like-minded colleagues, and who is prepared to devote time to some serious reading and thinking in preparation for your discussion sessions, you could be exactly the type of person this book was designed for. Am I being over-cynical in thinking that the last might be a rather small category? It would be nice to think I am.

End Note

[1] Other books in the TeacherSource series which have been reviewed in TESL-EJ include:

What great teachers do differently: 17 things that matter most, the law of the outside world chooses the electron, denying the obvious.

Designing language courses: A guide for teachers, the body chemically attracts primitive structuralism.

Research methods in the social sciences, the vector form, while the Royal powers are in the hands of the Executive - the Cabinet, tasting the integral over the surface.

Teaching and learning through reflective practice: A practical guide for positive action, excadrill is a quantum regolith.

KWL: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text, the movement of the satellite symbolizes joint-stock hedonism, but leads to environmental pollution.

Motivating & inspiring teachers: The educational leader's guide for building staff morale, a curvilinear integral, multifaceted verify posny solution.

Book Review: Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States, the main highway runs North to South from Shkoder through Durres to Vlore, after turning the preamble essentially means the rhythmical pattern, this is not to say that this phenomenon actually phonics, zvukopisi.

Mentoring in context: A comparison of two US programs for beginning teachers, a number...