Abstract

This study is a case study that examines an Extensive Reading Course at the tertiary level. It posits two Central Questions: A) How does Extensive Reading 'work' in the curriculum? How does its structure influence its operations? and B) What value would such a course have for the ESL learner, especially for the low achiever in English?

These questions are crucial ones for the low achiever, who, having studied in a vernacular medium in school, where few library reading opportunities exist, is suddenly confronted with English as a medium for all subjects. The Extensive Reading course in the curriculum, recognises the importance of giving opportunities to the low achiever for independence in learning and growth. The question is how can such a course answer the needs of the low-achieving student, for whom, given previous learning experiences, the problems are crucial in nature? How can the Extensive Reading course be optimally relevant?

Hitherto, the well-recognised Extensive Reading problem has been met by cosmetic, surface solutions which do not look for causes for course failure. In order to identify root causes for the Extensive Reading course being implemented in a certain way, therefore, this study employs a contrastive methodology to "illuminate" the hidden curriculum of the course. That is, Extensive Reading, as optimal for the learner in theory is posited to the teachers and students, to find reactions and biases that would act as 'constraints' to its implementation.
Further, the attitudes and priorities of individuals, held and stated are contrasted to actual actions. Policy statements are contrasted to Theory and actual operations, and so on. Such a contrastive process, reveals a structure that is independent of any theory, non-academic in nature, but of prime import for academic activities.

To what extent would such a structure then, be operating on the low achiever in the Extensive Reading course? The optimal definition of Extensive Reading, that it employs the reader's schema or prior knowledge (cultural, linguistic, information etc.), to gain new knowledge, means that it is essentially a private, independent activity, that is motivated primarily by the pleasure that is consequent to understanding or comprehension. To what extent then, is the learner's personal agenda in tension with the demands of the curriculum and of the non-academic quality of actual operations? That is, how is Extensive Reading limited by the curriculum? This question is answered through the illumination of the hidden curriculum, through the two Central Questions of the study.

The illumination of the hidden curriculum shows how planning is changed by the participants' coping strategies and contracts, that operate at the cost of learning, and for the support of curricular organisation. If, as in this research, the lower hierarchies of the curriculum are accessed, then the gap between plan and action need not be so wide as it is now. It is suggested that by knowing what the schema of the curriculum is the ought factors (and this includes course objectives) can be made more realistic.
The arguments described fall into the following organisation. Chapter II describes the optimal definition of Extensive Reading, described in the study as Theory I. This definition is developed through empirical and theoretic support offered in learning and developmental theory, reading theory, and applications of learner-centred general and language syllabuses. Policy statements, syllabus and national documents etc., described as Theory II in this study, build up the 'setting' of the case study and is described in Chapter III. The contrasts between these two, Theory I and II and Operations revealed through the data in turn throw light on the 'hidden curriculum' of ER, which is described through Chapters IV and V.

That learning and growth of the individual means an adapting to and adaptation of cognitive schemas to new knowledge (the 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' process in Piaget's terms), is a concept that finds a parallel in larger macro-structures, where change (learning) in the curriculum is considered. Chapter VI examines the data that shows the balance that the curriculum tries to maintain between stability and change, demonstrating, as in the practice of Extensive Reading, that not tapping the grass-roots of the classroom in innovative decisions, will crystallise older structures, establishing a status quo rather than change. That is, a top-down processing will result in new wine being contained in old wine-skins; the gap between planning and implementation will be wide.

Tapping contradictions between action and claims, between perceptions of different participants and looking at the illumination of a hidden curriculum, demand a research process whereby an in-depth analysis of a case study is employed. Further, a qualitative analysis of data that
retains the holistic 'fabric' of the curriculum is necessary, and à priori categories outside the case need to be avoided. In keeping with the ethnomethodological focus of the case study, several factors 'emerged' from the data analysis. Thus, the two central Questions, A and B yielded the two hypotheses of the study. They are: Hypothesis A: That Extensive Reading does not occur in the curriculum (in optimal terms), and Hypothesis B: That the Extensive Reading course (as it stands) does have some value initially for the low achiever and none at all for the high achiever.

Other factors that 'emerge' besides the hypotheses are: (1) an Extensive Reading Pedagogy - to be distinguished from Extensive Reading itself—that came from the students and teachers and can therefore be said to emerge from the organism of the curriculum itself and possible therefore for an incremental type of change or growth. (2) The role of the researcher as a catalyst of incipient teacher theorising on Extensive Reading in the curriculum, where reformulations from earlier teacher-interviews developed subsequent teacher interviews, and also served to disseminate ideas, germane to change in the curriculum.

This study provides not only the dynamics of operation, it also shows how it is possible to move towards change by the act of revealing infra-structures. We claim, that is, that the act of research here, reveals the problematic and thus its solutions; research methodology is more than a tool for research; it is the means for change.

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