Chapter 5

Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, and Classroom Assessment in a University English Language Program

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum, instruction, and classroom assessments should all be aligned with each other in order to promote student learning. By achieving alignment, classroom assessments become integrated into the curriculum and guide what and how teachers teach and what and how students learn. This chapter describes the case of how one university English language program improved curricular alignment through the use of teacher alignment forms for student learning outcomes (SLOs), level meetings, the use of test specifications, a peer review process for test development, an assessment handbook, and assessment workshops for teachers. These practices ensure explicit and documented alignment among their curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

INTRODUCTION

One major challenge for English language programs is to ensure consistency and continuity in instruction and assessment across course sections and among teachers. In this chapter, the authors will share the case of one language program as it developed more explicit curricular alignment. Following a review of the literature, there will be an overview of the program, its previous assessment practices, and its assessment problems. Then there will be an overview of the program’s current assessment practices, including the use of teacher alignment forms for student learning outcomes (SLOs), level meetings, the use of test specifications, a peer review process for test development, an assessment handbook, and

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assessment workshops for teachers. Finally, teachers’ feedback about the program’s current assessment practices will be shared.

**Conceptual Framework: Constructive Alignment**

Constructive alignment occurs when “[t]he curriculum is stated in the form of clear objectives….Teaching methods are chosen that are likely to realize those objectives….Finally, the assessment tasks address the objectives, so that you can test to see if the students have learned what the objectives state they should be learning” (Biggs, 1999, p. 26).

This process of alignment should begin by creating the SLOs at the outset of a course so that course designers “begin with the end in mind” (Fink, 2003), which allows teachers to determine what students need to know and to be able to do by the end of the course. The SLOs then guide what is taught and what is assessed. However, the SLOs do not necessarily guide how the SLOs are taught and how they are assessed. Therefore, to ensure alignment, teachers must “test what [they] teach and how [they] teach it” (Coombe, Folse, & Hubley, 2007, p. xxii). “Testing what they teach” should be achieved naturally if the instruction and assessments are both based on the same SLOs, but “testing how they teach” requires special attention. For instance, if a teacher uses speaking-based tasks to teach a grammar point, but then uses multiple-choice questions on the assessment, then the instruction and assessment are not aligned; the content of the instruction and assessment may be aligned (e.g., the same grammar point), but the format of the instructional task and assessment task are not aligned. As Cheng and Fox (2017) explained, “The formats we select for our tests should reflect the types of routinely occurring tasks that we use day-to-day in our classroom learning activities” (p. 115). To fully achieve alignment, instruction and assessments should be based on the same SLOs, and instruction and assessments should use the same task types.

When alignment is achieved, SLOs, teaching, and assessments become “mutually supportive; each is an integral part of the total system, not an add-on” (Biggs, 1999, p. 25). Assessments are no longer seen as a “necessary evil, the bad news of teaching and learning, to be conducted at the end of all the good stuff….In aligned teaching…assessment reinforces learning. Assessment is the senior partner in learning and teaching” (Biggs, 1999, p. 160). Therefore, when assessments are directly aligned with the SLOs and instruction, they actually have a positive impact, or washback, on teaching and learning. According to Coombe et al. (2007), washback is defined as “the effect of testing on teaching and learning” (p. xxiv) and can have positive or negative effects on students’ learning. The content and format of a test can affect students in many ways: directing what students do in class and how they do it, directing students’ attention to what is important and therefore directing them what to study and what not to study, and giving them motivation to study (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Similarly, Biggs (1999) stated that, “What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed” (p. 141).

According to Biggs (1999), there are two approaches that students may have towards learning. The surface approach to learning involves a superficial understanding of the course content. Facts or vocabulary are memorized without understanding them and without seeing the connection between ideas. On the other hand, a deep approach to learning involves

>a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully, so the student tries to use the most appropriate cognitive activities for handling it….When students feel this need-to-know, they try to focus on underlying meaning: on main ideas, themes, principles of successful applications. (Biggs, 1999, p. 16)
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