

EXCELLENCE IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION:
A FUNCTION OF CURRICULUM PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of language education, the term curriculum usually refers to an explicit design or written statement of the organization of courses which are offered by a school, department or other academic unit specializing in foreign languages, bilingual education, language arts or English as a Second Language (for an overview, see Stern, 1983: Part Six). However, curriculum can be defined not in the narrow sense of a structure, document or product, but more globally as a systematic process -- from needs analysis, through the more narrow sense of curriculum as the design of a structure of courses, to program evaluation (Brown and Richards, 1987; Richards, 1984). Curriculum in the latter sense centrally involves people and their interaction in developing a program (Brown and Pennington, 1986). We feel that active participation in the joint endeavor, referred to here as curriculum process, is the key to achieving excellence in language education for all parties involved.

In a language program, three primary constituencies can be identified whose interests and needs are both reflected in and affected by the curriculum process: students, faculty members and administrators. Thus curriculum development in all of its phases can be seen as a cooperative project involving input and participation by members of each of these groups. Cooperation

can help to ensure that the curriculum will be an accurate representation of the abilities, interests and characteristics of all three groups and so will be realistic and workable in the language program for which it is designed. Moreover, through the process of curriculum development, administrators, teachers and students can explore their needs and discover common concerns while learning how to work more effectively to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

The administrator's responsibility to involve all parties in the process of curriculum development will be the starting point of our discussion. Following these observations on the administrator's role, a proposal is offered for a systematic approach to curriculum design and maintenance that can aid in achieving productive working relationships among the various interest groups within a program. On the basis of this curriculum model, four program characteristics -- unity, consistency, efficiency and effectiveness -- are defined and their relevance for students, teachers and administrators explored. It is argued that these characteristics, or indicators of excellence, relate to each other and derive from the cooperative approach to curriculum outlined in the body of the paper.

The thesis of this paper is that such cooperative relationships are at the heart of the curriculum process and are basic to unity as conceptualized here. It is further maintained that unity is essential for achieving any of the other indicators of excellence, as it fosters a positive attitude toward improvement and change. Program unity therefore sets up the essential conditions in a language program for a continual

process of review and evolution, which we term evaluation (Brown, forthcoming). The ongoing function of evaluation itself is to maintain unity and tie together all aspects of the curriculum process.

THE ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE IN THE CURRICULUM PROCESS

The program administrator -- whose title may be department chair, director, academic coordinator, or others -- is naturally a central figure in curriculum development. To set the stage for the curriculum process, the administrator needs to establish an atmosphere that allows all interest groups to feel that they are involved in decision-making. Such an atmosphere is not always easy to create. It requires a number of qualities on the part of the administrator: an instinct for providing leadership, an ability to foster cooperation, a willingness to relinquish and to assign personal responsibility, the strength to give credit where credit is due, and a capacity to mediate among students, teachers and other outside groups such as parents, sponsors or other administrators. These qualities all come under the heading of "human skill". Human skill is the administrator's "ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort within the team he [or she] leads" (Katz, 1974, p. 92). It is an important element of a successful language curriculum because:

curriculum development is in large measure a group process.
... Curriculum development therefore requires a facilitator skilled in conducting meetings and in leading a group to

reach consensus or compromise. Human skill comes into play in many aspects of curriculum implementation, which ordinarily involves periodic meetings, as well as presentations, training sessions, observation, and feedback and counseling sessions (Pennington, 1985, p. 305).

In the curriculum process, the rewards for all members of the program will be directly commensurate with the administrator's abilities in these human skill areas.

While management styles vary widely, an administrator with highly developed human skill can effect change and lead other people to accomplish all that is within their abilities. How the administrator then deals with the multiplicity of variables in language program administration, teaching and learning will be a unique set of decisions based on the personalities, institutional priorities and constraints associated with a given program. It is possible, nonetheless, to propose a framework within which any program -- regardless of the individuals involved -- can develop in a coordinated effort beneficial to all participants.

COMPONENTS OF THE CURRICULUM PROCESS

The approach advocated here applies to either the design of curriculum from scratch or the ongoing maintenance of a program. In either case, it should be viewed as a process within which the students, faculty and administration can work together successfully. Figure 1 illustrates this process, which includes five main components: needs analysis, objectives, tests, materials and teaching. Note that evaluation is a separate

dimension that connects the other components in a continuous cycle, or process, of revision and potential improvement. This figure is adapted from the systems approach model for designing curriculum of Dick and Carey (1978). It is simplified down to the five basic components advocated by Mager (1962) in order to facilitate the conceptualization and implementation of language curriculum in specific educational settings.

[Figure 1 about here]

Needs analysis. Needs analysis is the gathering and analysis of linguistic and personal information necessary to determine, and ultimately to satisfy, the program-related needs of a group of students, teachers and administrators within a specific context. In the field of language education, the concept of needs analysis is not new (e.g., Munby, 1978; Richterich & Chancerel, 1978). In the past, however, such analyses have focused too narrowly on strictly linguistic items and structures. Any needs analysis that does not take into account the characteristics, goals and values of the individuals involved destines the program to failure. Hence, a needs analysis, whether coordinated by outside consultants or the administrators and teachers themselves, must include meetings, interviews and/or questionnaires aimed at gathering information on the individual and collective needs of administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other relevant parties (see Bernbrock, 1979 and Brown & Pennington, 1986 for useful procedures).

Successful curriculum development, then, starts with

research into the needs and desires of the student population served by the program, as well as into the interests, abilities and characteristics of the faculty and other relevant constituencies, e.g., students' sponsors, parents, future employers or higher level administrators and policy makers. Other types of data can be valuable in the beginning stages. Different faculty members might research current literature on curriculum design or study existing course plans from other institutions. Useful input might also be gained by contacting other departments or administrators who might have experience in curriculum planning. For an already established program, curriculum team members can gain insights into program structure by visiting instructors' classes throughout the program. In this way, team members can find out the content and methods being used elsewhere, and so learn what is proving successful in different skill areas and levels at other institutions. Such information can provide useful insights for the ongoing evaluation and revision processes.

Continuous data gathering activities may usefully result in a series of meetings in which participants share the insights that they have accumulated. This first phase of curriculum planning, which is primarily for sharing information, also serves the important function of establishing the group process. A viable group process is essential in all phases of curriculum planning and implementation, so that a wide range of viewpoints will be represented in discussion and consensus or compromise can be reached when necessary.

This is not to say that each person's viewpoint must be

attended to at all times. In fact, students are often naive about their own linguistic needs, at least from a language teacher's perspective. At the same time, all available sources of information should be utilized to make the best possible overall decisions. But whatever decisions are ultimately made, the cooperative decision-making process itself yields benefits for all participants. By simply asking for their opinions, the administrator has drawn them into the process and has created an interest in the language program which reaches beyond their individual classrooms.

Goals and objectives. One logical outcome of needs analyses is the specification of goals, i.e., general formulations of what must be accomplished in order to satisfy students' needs.

Objectives, on the other hand, are precise statements about the content, experiences or skills that are expected to result in attainment of a given goal. Sets of goals and objectives can help to delineate different course series or proficiency levels and serve as a basis for ongoing examination of the curriculum in terms of the efficacy of goals and instructional sequencing.

A debate that has arisen among education specialists concerns how narrowly specified objectives have to be. Opposite ends of the spectrum might be represented by those who favor experiential objectives, which are stated in broad terms describing general experiences that students should have during the course of instruction, and those favoring behavioral objectives, which are stated in specific terms describing observable behaviors that students should exhibit at the end of a course.

Within the context of language education, authors have either championed the use of objectives (Steiner, 1975; and Findley & Nathan, 1980) or vehemently argued against their use, at least in the strict behavioral sense (Tumposky, 1984). Steiner (1975), for example, believes that behavioral objectives provide the student with a valuable sense of direction and achievement. Tumposky (1984) -- advocating a more individualized approach to instruction -- argues that language learning cannot be ordered into a uniform sequence of specific behaviors. Nevertheless, as Jarvis and Adams (1979) argue:

Goals cannot be considered an optional component of a second language program. They are essential ..., for education is purposeful Statements of objectives serve purposes beyond clarifying the intent of their formulator: they function as a communication device among all groups involved in the educational process, including teachers, administrators, parents, and other interested parties. (p. 10)

These "interested parties" include the students, who gain focus and motivation through explicitly stated goals and objectives.

Attention to the form that objectives take is not as important in our view as the benefits accrued from the effort of working together as a program to formulate goals and objectives from the needs analysis. In the same way that a needs analysis should be based on as much information as is possible and feasible to gather, specification of goals and statements of objectives should take advantage of a variety of types and sources of information. Individual teachers and students should

be consulted during the process even if not enlisted in the actual writing of goals and objectives. Their participation at any stage will have the same beneficial unifying effects discussed above. The process can also end in the creation of a set of objectives which are more suitable and realistic than the administrator alone would be able to create. Moreover, working together at the early stages of program development often helps to avoid problems later on.

The curriculum will gradually begin to emerge, based on the experience and values of the individual members of the group as they evaluate all of the information available on all of the components of the program. As participants seek to define general goals and specific objectives, they will come to many decision points about the form and content of these goals and objectives. At each point, choices will have to be made. These choices will each be significant in defining the ultimate character of the ever-evolving curriculum.

Testing and materials. The issues of testing and materials are dealt with separately in Figure 1 since these are two distinct processes in curriculum development. Testing must respond to numerous areas of decision-making within a program: placement of students into levels, diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses, achievement in courses and overall language proficiency. Materials is another large area for choice, as it must be decided whether to create in-house materials designed specifically to meet the objectives of a particular program or to purchase commercially available texts, cassette

programs, etc. If the first option is selected, then materials may be developed to match curricular levels or course series. Even commercially available texts can be adapted and coordinated to fit the goals and objectives of the particular program. In either case, the creation, purchase or adaptation of suitable materials is an important matter worthy of much time and attention by the program administrators, teachers and students.

It is essential for tests and materials to be consistent with the course objectives, which in turn reflect the needs of the students as formulated by the members of the program. Everyone should be involved in the selection or creation of materials, as in all stages of the curriculum process, giving input, taking responsibility for certain aspects, feeling a sense of investment -- an investment in shared needs, goals, and objectives. Administrators can draw on any existing strengths within a program to accomplish the adaptation and/or creation of tests and materials appropriate to their student population. Teachers may be identified who already possess the abilities to create and produce tests or materials. Curriculum development may include provision of special training for some members of the staff in one or the other of these specialized skills. It may be necessary to call in consultants in addition to pooling the talents of the entire teaching staff in order to accomplish these demanding tasks.

Teaching. The teacher has traditionally been viewed as a "jack-of-all-trades" who was responsible for everything related to the course of instruction. Thus it was up to the teacher to determine the needs and proficiency levels of the students, the

goals and objectives for each course, and the tests which should be used for placement, achievement and promotion. Moreover, the selection or creation of appropriate materials was a central and often time-consuming part of the teaching job. Under these conditions, it is a wonder that language teachers ever had enough time and energy left over for teaching!

It is for the teacher's sake that the administrator must either provide all of these curriculum components based on teacher input or work out strategies for teachers to share the load, each supporting all the others. A small amount of each teacher's autonomy may be forfeited by such a strategy of working together. However, much can be gained for the program from individual satisfaction at being a part of the curriculum team and from pride in professional development. The program also benefits by not having each teacher working in isolation, reinventing each of the components independently, with varying degrees of success.

The coordination of other aspects of the curriculum leaves teachers time to concentrate on their main job: teaching. Given strong program support, the teacher is left to focus on the most effective means for meeting objectives which reflect the perceived needs of the students and for helping them achieve those objectives. This requires professional judgements about how best to convey the curricular objectives to the students. These judgments are important as the teacher deals with the myriad linguistic, cognitive, and affective variables interacting with each other to form the unique characteristics of a given

class. Administrators must be supportive of faculty members, at the same time encouraging them to function with a high degree of independence and autonomy in their classrooms, allowing them to perform as skilled professionals able to adapt to the constantly changing conditions of individual teaching situations (see Pennington, forthcoming).

Evaluation. The last remaining element of the model shown in Figure 1 is evaluation, defined here as the continuous gathering of linguistic and personal information necessary to continue meeting the learning needs of a particular group of students. This definition is very close to that given for "needs analysis" above, and justifiably so. The primary difference is that needs analysis is an initial gathering of information while evaluation is an ongoing process of information collection. Evaluation can make use of all of the insights gained in the needs analysis and also draw on all of the information learned at each stage of curriculum development. In this conceptualization, the distinction between "formative" and "summative" evaluation is not necessary. Evaluation is a process devoted to continually improving each component of a program on the basis of what is known about all other components separately as well as collectively. This systematic approach to curriculum design and maintenance is flexible and responsive to change because it is a process, not an end stage, or product. It therefore aids administrators in maintaining a program that can adapt to the changing conditions of the world at large, changes in the student body or staff, or revisions in the theory or practice of language teaching.

Looking at curriculum development long-range, periodic input from a variety of sources, including outside evaluators, will ensure a curriculum which is successful in many different ways. Input from sources both within and outside the program is important since each constituency is likely to have a different perspective on what constitutes a successful curriculum, as well as on the degree to which the current curriculum is succeeding in meeting its stated goals. Continued review and revision is also necessary to maintain relevance and consistency with the program's overall purpose. A curriculum that is continuously evolving on the basis of large-scale input from many different quarters is less likely, moreover, to meet resistance from any individual or group since participation from all is welcomed, and responsibility for the curriculum is shared.

GENERAL PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Curriculum development as outlined above is a cyclical process of interrelated activities. On the basis of a needs analysis, statements of goals and objectives are developed, and testing, materials and teaching are all geared to these specifications. Evaluation provides for continuous monitoring and mutual revision in each of the other curricular components, tying together all facets of the program. A main function of evaluation, then, is to achieve and maintain unity throughout the curriculum process, coordinating the components and ensuring collective responses to problems. The data-gathering function of evaluation is thus complemented by an equally important coordinative function.

In this cyclical system, improvement and evolution of the program are desired and expected outcomes. A favorable attitude toward change and an orientation to progress are engendered, such that administrators, faculty members and students are always seeking a better result. Thus, the curriculum process outlined here, which centrally involves cooperative decision-making, teamwork and evaluation, leads directly to the pursuit of goals not yet achieved, that is, to a striving for excellence.

The level of cooperation and morale in a program would therefore seem to be a good indirect indicator, or criterion (in the sense of implying other features related to quality), of its overall quality. This indicator, which we have termed unity, provides a foundation for achieving the other general program characteristics of consistency, efficiency and effectiveness. The four characteristics, when taken together, serve to define the notion of excellence in a language program. When considered separately, they can be seen as individual indicators of excellence. The relationship between these indicators of excellence and the curriculum model presented in Figure 1 is shown in Figure 2. Although specific priorities may vary widely, the general program characteristics, which are described next, serve the interests of students, faculty and administrators alike.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Unity. Unity in an organization means that people work comfortably together and share common goals and purposes. Unity

among participants fosters and atmosphere in which an organization can flourish and so provides a strong foundation for developing a high level of success (Katz, 1974). The curriculum model described above promotes a unified vision of the goals and priorities of the language program. Such a vision helps to focus the daily activities of people and to develop in them a sense of loyalty to the group within which they work and of pride in the work which they contribute to help achieve the overall purposes of the organization. Providing a unified vision also helps to develop the qualities of future-orientation and goal-direction which underlie high morale (Roy, 1965).

In the process advocated here, unity means that students learn, teachers teach and administrators manage in a mutually beneficial relationship. The program administrator helps to foster a spirit of partnership by including members of each group in planning and decision making. Through this type of activity, participants learn the skills of negotiation and compromise in reaching mutually acceptable decisions. Along the way, program members start to develop shared goals and a common sense of purpose. They begin to realize that the program advances only when individuals consider their own interests in the context of the interests of the group. A unified curriculum effort avoids the problems that result when the administration and the faculty, or individual teachers, work at cross-purposes. As a joint effort, curriculum becomes a reflection of many individual personalities and a consolidation of a wide range of interests, needs and points of view.

Consistency. Consistency relates to the stability of

results within a particular context. In the systematic approach to curriculum, consistency means having reliable mechanisms for achieving and assessing program goals and objectives. This reliability is a precondition for sound measurement of any kind in language testing and evaluation (see Perkins and Angelis, 1985). It is in the interests of all three main constituencies for the program to have consistent procedures and measurable standards against which progress can be judged and instruction planned and evaluated.

A consistent system for testing and placement of students goes a long way toward ensuring high quality instruction and benefits the students and faculty in a number of ways. For one thing, an explicit presentation of consistent criteria that characterize each level or facet of instruction will help to keep the different aspects of instruction distinct, while providing for continuity from level to level and course to course. Consistent standards therefore help eliminate the problems of grossly misplaced students, mixed-level classes, and substantial overlap in the content of adjacent levels or related courses. It also helps to avoid the situation in which an instructor at one level has to teach what students should already have mastered at another level of instruction or in another part of the program. Moreover, in making course standards explicit, both instructors and students will know what they are aiming for and so may have a greater chance of succeeding. When their efforts are evaluated, they will be fully aware of the basis on which their performance is measured.

A testing system which provides for consistent and explicit standards against which performance can be judged is the fairest system for all parties concerned. Moreover, such a testing system serves the administrator well, as it represents a means of monitoring program quality and provides useful information for the ongoing process of curriculum development. Once the standards of instruction are made explicit, materials and teaching can be geared to explicitly stated goals and objectives in each facet or level of the program. In this way, teaching and learning time can be put to the most efficient use.

Efficiency. Efficiency in any operation means that resources will be used as productively as possible in pursuit of organizational goals and objectives. This implies that individuals within the organization will not utilize their time or energy working on areas which are not consistent with its purposes and that the organization will not suffer major upsets which threaten stability. An efficient organization achieves a sort of equilibrium which protects it from internal and external disturbances. Such an organization can accommodate unexpected problems without large-scale changes or great infusions of human or financial resources.

A curriculum built around goals and objectives based on needs analysis is designed for maximal efficiency. At the same time, it has built-in flexibility and can tolerate adjustments which might be necessary to respond to future conditions. This helps to prevent major upsets in program operation in the short run, while accommodating to gradual change in the long run. The curriculum model outlined here maintains efficiency by

continually gauging the appropriateness of goals, objectives, testing, materials and teaching in relation to each other, and then adjusting each component as necessary to maintain consistency within the entire system (see Akst & Hecht, 1980, pp. 264-265, for a discussion of 'appropriateness' and 'efficiency' in program evaluation).

It is in the best interests of all parties in a language program to have an efficient operation and to avoid frequent, major changes (Pennington, 1983). Efficiency means that classroom instruction and study time are perceived as resulting in a high level of language proficiency in the shortest period of time. It is in the students' best interests, therefore, to have a stable and efficient instructional system, so that they will not have to experience major changes or delays in their course of study.

A flexible structure is to the advantage of the faculty since it provides guidance for instruction while at the same time allowing for creativity and independence in the specific means which can be chosen to reach the desired ends. If faculty members are to have freedom in deciding what and how to teach, then the administrator must ensure that resources are provided for suitable materials and teacher training. To ensure efficiency and equilibrium throughout the program, the administrator must allocate resources to each component in relation to the other components.

Effectiveness. A language program is effective to the extent that it does what it is intended to do. Effectiveness may

be assessed categorically, as when a certain result is achieved or not. Often, however, effectiveness is measured in relative terms. A certain program is judged more effective than another program, for example, to the extent that it achieves better, faster or more complete results. A particular course is sometimes judged as more effective than another, based on past experience within the same program or a similar program.

From the student's perspective, an effective curriculum makes it possible to advance through classes and levels of the program in a systematic progression of steps. For the student, therefore, an effective curriculum will be organized in terms of a series of explicit objectives specifying skills or tasks which can be mastered in a logical sequence during the course of study. Similarly, instructors have an interest in working with a curriculum which describes learning in terms of well-defined objectives on the basis of which units of instruction can be designed. Specific objectives are also desirable for the administrator, who has an interest in controlling program quality and in testing the effectiveness of instruction. In sum, a program is effective to the extent that its curricular objectives are explicit, specific and sequenced so as to be learnable (by the student), teachable (by the instructor) and testable (by the administrator).

Interrelationships of program characteristics. The program characteristics are interrelated in that unity provides the starting point for achieving consistency, efficiency and effectiveness in turn. It is through the creation of shared goals and a common sense of purpose (unity) that it becomes possible to

develop consistent standards and procedures for measuring program outcomes (consistency). Based on these guidelines, resources can be directed most productively to achieve the desired educational purposes (efficiency). A program which follows this system has the best chance of achieving the results it intends (effectiveness). Thus, a program will be effective to the extent that its members collaborate to define needs; to delineate goals and objectives; to develop testing, materials and teaching on the basis of these; and to continually evaluate the goodness of fit of each of these components in relation to the others. In this way, excellence in language education becomes a function of curriculum process.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the curriculum process and program characteristics described above may have seemed unachievable in the real world of organizing and managing a language program, where differing needs and priorities exist among various individuals and groups. All too often in the field of language education, the interests of teachers and administrators, like those of workers and management, have been thought of as diametrically opposed. At the same time, it is ironic that the concerns of administrators and teachers have often been directly addressed in language programs, while the specific priorities of the students have been ignored or neglected. It has been argued here, however, that this need not be the case and that a spirit of partnership can be established which is in the best interests of administrators and teachers, as well as the students for whose

benefit the language program exists.

The mark of an effective administrator is the ability to enlist the active involvement and commitment of faculty members as well as students in all facets of the curriculum process. The key element of this process is evaluation, which connects the components and unifies the curriculum in a continuing process of review and improvement. As Jarvis & Adams (1979) state:

"Evaluation activity must be premised on the conviction that conscientious, honest evaluation can lead to better programs and therefore to a more significant role for language educators in the total education process " (p. 3). The unification of interests which results from the curriculum process creates an orientation to progress which, as we have maintained, fosters characteristics intrinsic to excellence in language education.

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Figure 1: Systematic Approach for Designing and Maintaining a Language Curriculum

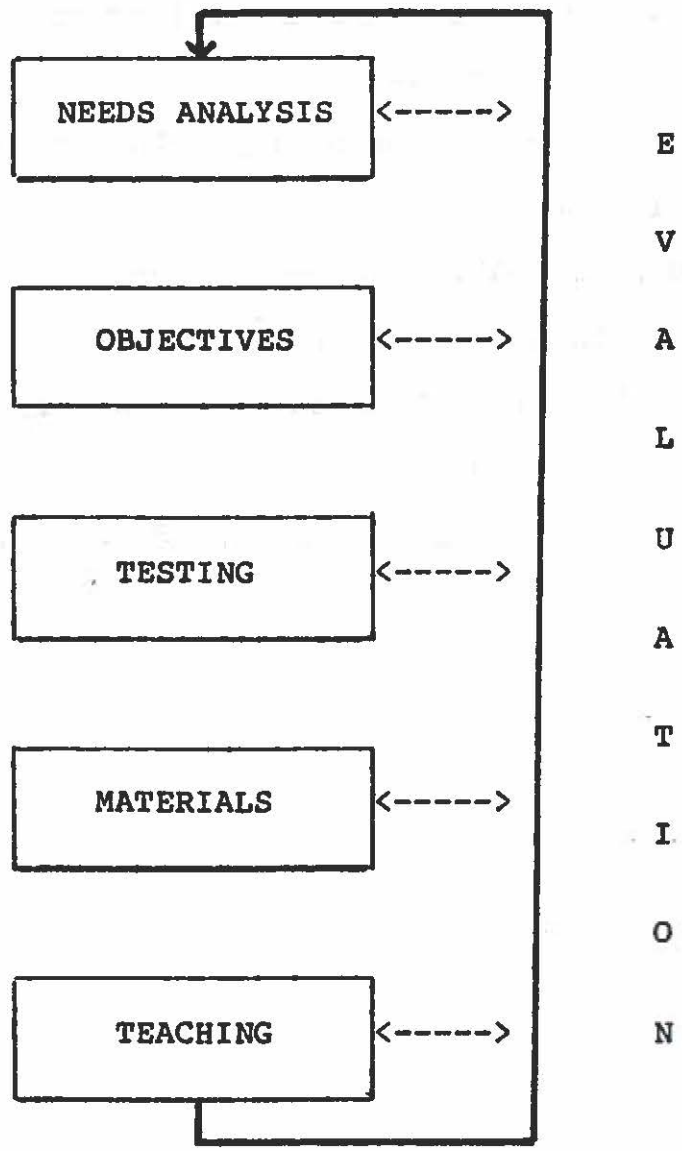


Figure 2: Relationship between the Curriculum Process and the Indicators of Excellence

