

## INVESTIGATING THE PROCESS OF EAP COURSE DESIGN IN A COLLEGE CONTEXT FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Within the domain of TESOL curriculum, course design is the foundation that contributes to shaping, guiding, and articulating the subsequent processes of curriculum development-curriculum implementation and evaluation. The study aims to understand teachers' experiences regarding the process of course design. The study draws on the interpretive paradigm employing its epistemology and philosophy as an underpinning stance. Accordingly, the qualitative approach has been selected for determining the strategy and methods of sampling, and data collection and data analysis. The findings concerned with the teacher data showed that teachers conceptualize course design as a matter of prioritizing the key component that contributes to shaping and guiding the other elements or components of a course. Based on the findings of data analysis, the study offers a number of implications that are of value for those who are involved in the process of course design, particularly in the current context.*

**KEYWORDS:** course design, curriculum development, material design, teacher beliefs

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### INTRODUCTION

Course design is one stage within the process of curriculum or course development, but it is the most crucial stage. This is due to its status as an initial stage or the foundation in the process of curriculum development that contributes to shaping and guiding the subsequent stages of teaching and evaluation of a course (Graves, 2000; Toohey, 2002). In light of this, course design plays a crucial role in shaping classroom methodology. Graves (2000, p. x) points to this contribution stating that “Course design and teaching go hand-in-hand as the teacher builds and acts on knowledge in and from classroom practice.” Similarly, Toohey (2002, p.1) refers to the importance of course design when she states that “Of course the way in which the curriculum is brought to life is equally important, but the power of good teacher-student interactions is multiplied many times by good course design.”

Due to the fast development of technology and the status of English as an international language, curriculum development has undergone certain changes across all stages: course design, methodology, and students' assessment (Fink, 2013; 2007; 2009; Thomas, 2012; Diamond, 2008; Richards, 2007, McKernan, 2008, Pennycook, 1999; Apple, 1999). In Oman, where this study takes place, the field of English language teaching has witnessed certain changes and reformations in order to fulfill the needs of learners in accordance with the

requirements of the global trends (Al Jardani, 2012; Al Issa, 2007). At the level of course design, which is the primary concern of this study, certain changes took place in the selection of materials and content of a course and the development of goals and objectives.

My perspective in this study is influenced by two crucial integrated issues: the first issue is the teacher involvement in course design to produce effective, powerful courses that as Fink states “prepare students not only for future classes but also for future personal, social, and professional life experiences” (2007, p.13).

In the context where the current study takes place, teachers are given as Toohey states the privilege of designing the courses they teach as this reflects “their control over curriculum” (2002:1). In this respect, teachers’ role involves selecting materials and content for a particular course, developing specific objectives, and preparing formal written and oral exams for students’ assessment. The aim of teachers, no doubt, is to articulate courses that benefit students not only for classroom purposes but also for future purposes.

There is a growing number of studies that had been conducted to examine the process of course design within the area of English language teaching (ELT). However, there is a notable lack of empirical research that is concerned with designing EAP courses based on teachers’ perspectives and contextual factors. Moreover, there is no study that had been conducted to investigate how EAP courses can be designed by teachers who deliver them. Therefore, this study intends to fill in these gaps in our TESOL area via collecting data from interviewing a group of teachers in an EAP undergraduate context in Oman who is actually involved in designing the courses they teach. This study is thought to contribute to knowledge through the process of constructing and developing a holistic contextualized course design model based on a synthesis of theoretical views and teachers’ views. It also intends to provide a set of implications and suggestions for EFL/ESL/ and EAP educators and teachers to take steps toward designing their courses. More specifically, the study aims to understand how teachers in a particular EAP context in Oman design the courses they teach based on their beliefs and perspectives. It also aims to investigate and explore what issues and factors have the greatest impact on course design and how they affect the process. In light of these aims, the study addresses the following questions:

Q.1 How do teachers at a college context in Oman design their EAP courses?

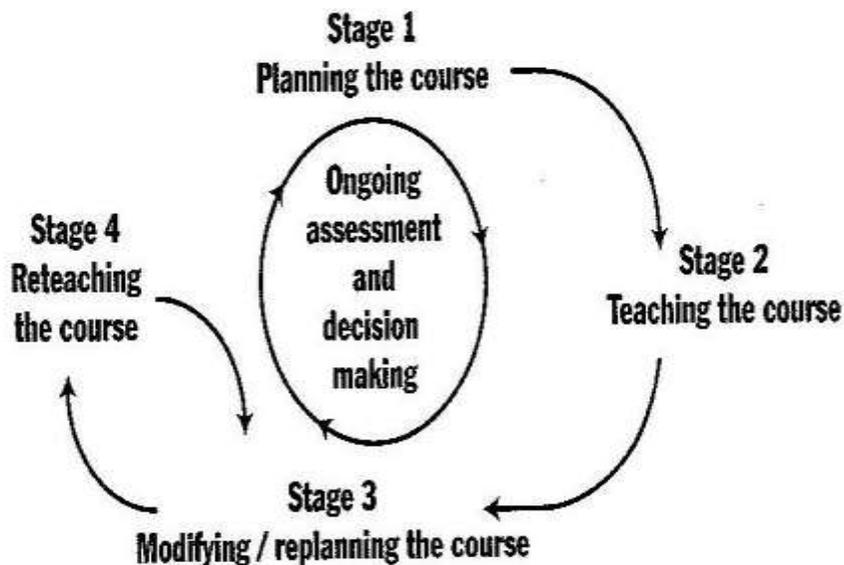
Q.2 What is the best way to develop a holistic contextualized model of EAP course design at a higher education context?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Course design is defined by Hutchinson and Waters (1991, p.65) as “an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge.” On the other hand, Graves defines Course design as “a teaching/learning experience that occurs over a specific time with a specific focus”(2008, p. 147). In this respect,

Graves argues that the terms ‘curriculum’ and ‘course’ must be viewed distinctively. She points out that the term curriculum must be viewed in the broadest sense “as the philosophy, purposes, design, and implementation of a whole program” (1996, p.3). She further argues that the two terms, course and curriculum, cannot be identical since the curriculum requires some features that are out of teachers' concerns such as assessment analysis, placement test, the program evaluation, etc.

At the broadest level, Graves (1996) also refers to the process of course development pointing out that it is similar to the one of curriculum development in terms of involving four stages: “planning the course,” “teaching the course,” “ongoing assessment” and “decision making and reteaching it” (p. 4) as in Figure 1 below. From the above statement, we can interpret that course design is part of the course or curriculum development and cannot be used with these terms synonymously.



**Figure 1: The process of course development for the teacher (adapted from Graves, 1996, p.4)**

## **MODELS OF COURSE DESIGN**

The literature on course design has introduced several models and frameworks that have been developed by specialists in the field of language curriculum development. For example, Dubin and Olshtain (1987) presented considerable work on course design, taking into consideration the factors contributing to constructing courses such as materials design, developing goals and objectives, syllabus design. Yalden (1987) added a further considerable contribution to the literature throughout her model called: “Stages in Language Program Development.” In 1995, Brown developed a coherent approach for language curriculum development that is presented in

the form of a model called: “Systematic approach to designing and maintaining Language Curriculum.” Nation and Macalister (2010, p.4) developed an important model called “a model of the parts of the curriculum design process,” indicating that course design is the central part of the process of curriculum design.

Graves’s recent model (2000), which is further developed from her previous one (1996) and from other classic and recent models, is called “A Framework of Course Development Process.” It portrays course design as a combination of processes that are linked together in the form of a flow chart. Figure 2 illustrates the names of components and the way they are organized. The focus of this study will be on Graves's model (2000). This is because it draws on the belief that "teachers are the best to develop their courses" (2000:5). In terms of focus and aims, this model is compatible with my study that seeks to understand the role of teachers in course design (See Figure 2).

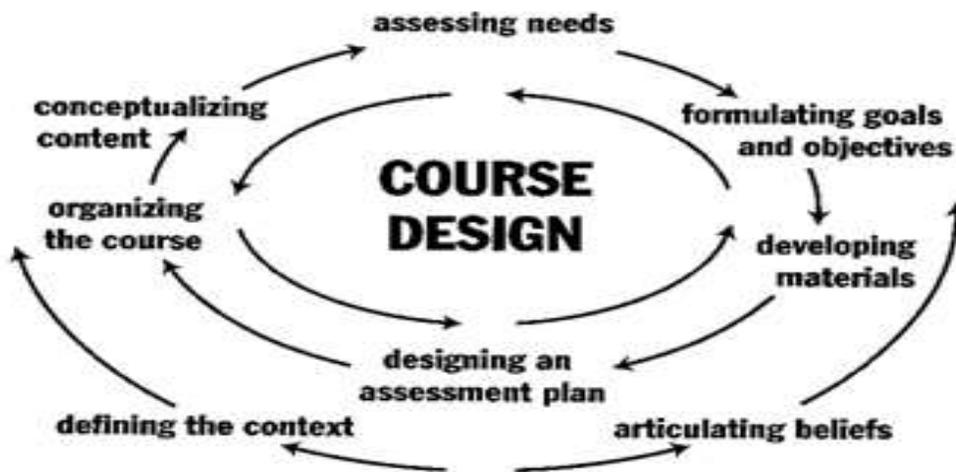


Figure 2: A Framework of Course Development Process (Graves, 2000, p.3)

## PRINCIPLES OF COURSE DESIGN

Course design is a complex process as it is assembled of a number of components, each with special requirements. In practice, course designers and teachers must consider a few questions such as which element to start with, how to arrange the elements in a principled manner, and what learners need, and so on. For this purpose, there are several underlying principles and assumptions based on different philosophical approaches that contribute to designing courses in a principled way. Below is a brief outline of these principles.

- **The Starting Point of the Course Design**-this principle is concerned with which component to start with when designing a course. Is it logical, for example, to start with

or syllabus design or developing learning outcomes? Graves (2000, p.51) argues that “deciding where to begin will depend on how you problematize your situation, that is, how you determine the challenges that you can most productively address within the context.” What we understand from Graves is that the decision of where to begin in designing a course is based on understanding the context and addressing its challenges.

- **Manner of Sequencing Components in Course Design**-It is concerned with what kind of path to follow through the process of curriculum design. In response to this question, there are two methods, either in a linear or in a non-linear order (for further discussion, see Graves, 2000).
- **Alignment in Course Design**- alignment in course design is a crucial principle that determines “the success of any learning environment” (Reeves, 2006, p. 302) by creating relevant, coherent, and meaningful courses (Graves, 2000; Fink, 2003; 2009, Whetten, 2007). The idea of alignment means creating a connection among the components of course design.
- **Course design is a dynamic Process**- Graves describes the dynamism of course design "as work in progress" (2000. P. 7). This implies that course design is changeable and accepts modification at the level of a single component or at the level of the whole process. The rationale behind this principle is due to the association of course design with teaching (Graves, 2000; Brown, 1995; Yalden, 1987). Since "teaching is an organic, unpredictable, challenging, satisfying, and frustrating process" (Graves, p. 7), a course or its components should be modified to be more "responsive" to a "particular group." For example, the formulation of goals has to be changed or adapted every year in accordance with students' needs and knowledge in the field.

## COMPONENTS OF COURSE DESIGN

Most of the models deal with course design as a process that is composed of several basic components or learning elements (Srijono, 2007). This section will shed light on the basic components with the purpose of indicating their role in building up the process of course design.

- **Defining the context**- “Defining the context” (Graves, 2000) or “situation analysis” (Richards, 2007) is viewed as the foundation of course design. At the specific level, context refers to a particular teaching-learning setting represented by the classroom, the school, the institution, a specific group of teachers and students, and specific learning topics (Graves, 2008; 2000; 1996). It also involves issues to be considered at the course level, such as the level of students, the length of the course, and the setting where the course is taking place.

- **Articulating Beliefs-** From pedagogical perspectives, the term ‘teacher beliefs’ refers to a teacher’s views and perceptions regarding particular issues such as teaching, learning, students, and articulating learning elements of a course. Graves (2000) considers teacher beliefs as the foundation of course design. Her argument is based on the rationale that is articulating beliefs guides teachers to design and implement their courses effectively since their beliefs are based on their previous and present experience in their professional context (for further discussion see (Gabilon, 2012; Borg, 2001; Farrell and Kun, 2008; Borg, 2008; 2006; Rogers and Hu, 2007; Chung-hsien Wu et al., 2011).
- **Needs Analysis-** Needs analysis is defined by Graves as “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” (2000, p. 98). Needs analysis is viewed as the basic component in course design upon which the other components such as the goals of the course, activities, topics, and assessments and evaluations are built (Richards, 2007; Brown, 1995; Jordan, 2004; Brindley, 1989).

Nation and Macalister raise a crucial issue concerning “What needs to be learned” (2010, p.24). Therefore, they refer to three approaches underlying the type of needs to be focused on. One approach is by Munby called ‘target-situation analysis’ that focuses on “the students’ needs at the end of a language course, and target-level performance” (Jordan, 2004). The second approach is advocated by Richterich, and Chancerel called “present-situation analysis” that is concerned with “the students’ state of a language at the beginning of the language course” (Jordan, 2004, p. 24). The third approach is advocated by Hutchinson and Waters (1991) called the ‘learning-centered approach.’ In light of this approach, Hutchinson and Waters make a distinction between ‘target needs’ and ‘learning needs.’ Target needs are concerned with “what the learner needs to do in the target situation,” whereas learning needs are concerned with what the learner needs to do in the learning situation. Learner needs can also be categorized in terms of ‘objective needs’ and ‘subjective needs’ (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991). Both ‘necessities’ and ‘lacks’ fit to objective needs, while ‘wants’ fit into subjective needs (Jordan, 2004). Furthermore, Hutchinson and Waters analyze target needs into three types- ‘necessities,’ ‘lacks,’ and ‘wants.’ Below is a brief definition of each type.

**Necessities**-involve what is important for students to know in order to act effectively in the target situation.

**Lacks**-involve any gaps between what the students already know and the target situation.

**Wants**-involve what the students wish to learn.

- **Conceptualizing content-** Among the critical components in course design is one of content (Graves, 2000; 1996; Nation and Macalister, 2010; Breen, 2001; Crandall, 1987). The element of content is referred to in different terms such as “conceptualizing

content” (Graves, 2000), syllabus design (Yalden, 1987; Dubin and Olishtain, 1987), “selection and sequencing units of a particular subject” (Nation and Macalister, 2010), while Richards (2013) refers to it in terms of “input.”

- **Material Development-** Brown defines the term material as “any systematic description of the techniques and exercises to be used in classroom teaching” (1995, p.139). Specifically, the term ‘material’ involves any pedagogical input such as textbooks, workbooks, and teacher’s guides in addition to any software and audio-visual material. The term ‘material development,’ on the other hand, is defined as a process that comprises making decisions and options by teachers such as adaptation, modification, and reduction when selecting materials for a given subject (Johansson, 2006; Tomlinson, 1998). Generally, materials concerned with ELT are of two types, authentic materials, and created materials. Richards makes an important distinction between them in terms of advantages and disadvantages (for further discussion, see Richards, 2007; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 2004).
- **Formulating goals and objectives-** In curriculum design, the terms goals and objectives are two key elements since they provide guidelines, focus, and description of learning purposes for both teachers and students (Richards, 2007; Graves, 2000; Brown, 1995; Dubin and Olishtain, 1987). However, the two terms are not identical. The term ‘goals development’ is defined by Brown as “general statements concerning desirable and attainable program purposes and aims based on perceived language and situation needs” (1995, p.71). In comparison to goals, Objectives are defined as “specific statements that describe the particular knowledge, behaviors, and/or skills that the learner will be expected to know or perform at the end of a course or program” (Brown, 1995: 73). Richards (2007) provides very practical guidelines for teachers who are interested in formulating the learning objectives for an EFL course supported by many examples (for further discussion, see Richards, 2007).

## RESEARCH STUDIES IN COURSE DESIGN

Research on curriculum development does not show studies that are directly concerned with investigating the teacher’s role in designing the EFL/EAP course design as a whole process. However, there is research on addressing either the role of teachers in designing curriculum or examining single components of course design, particularly in relation to syllabus design, material development, and students’ needs.

With regard to examining the role of teachers in curriculum development, Alwan (2006) carried out a qualitative study for the purpose of understanding teachers’ perceptions about curriculum development and curriculum change in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A similar study was conducted by Uztosun and Troudi (2015) but with a different sample and different contexts.

The sample was a group of college teachers in a tertiary context in Turkey. Using qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection, the researchers explored the participants' perceptions of the issue of curriculum change in English language teaching departments in Turkish universities.

With regard to the research examining course components, Al Issa (2007) conducted a qualitative study at the level of syllabus design, in which he argues for the importance of teacher role in managing the mandated textbooks by the Ministry of Education in Oman. His argument is based on the reason that the syllabus design in these textbooks does not promote students' communication in English in response to the life of modernization and technology that Oman, as a developing country, is looking for. Concerning students' needs, Davis (2006) reported a study she has carried out in her class at the university level in Japan in which she argues that there must be an extent to teachers' involvement in making decisions regarding this aspect. She suggests that in order to collect information about students' needs for a particular course, it is advisable to involve students in the process via designing "a class-specific questionnaire survey" (2006, p. 4).

There are other studies that have been conducted for this purpose in the context of Arabian Gulf (for example, Al Aafi, 2014; Abudu, 2015; Al Bdaiwi, 2011; Abdel Jawad and Abu Radwan, 2011; Al Issa, 2008; Al Hinai, 2011; Al Jadidi, 2009; Carroll, 2009; 2007; Carl, 2005; Carroll and Palermo, 2006 ). Overall, these studies valued teacher involvement in curriculum development is an important factor that has attracted the attention of many researchers. However, the researcher has noticed that there is no study, neither internationally nor in the Arab World, in which teachers were involved in course design as a whole process. Hopefully, my study will fill in this gap and suggest relevant issues for further research.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In conjunction with the interpretivism paradigm underpinning this study, the case study has been chosen as a research strategy for the purpose of providing "a framework for data collection and analysis" (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p.40; Chappelle and Duff, 2003; Devers and Frankil, 2000; Esteberg, 2002). I understand that there are certain realities or strategies for conducting my qualitative research. However, based on epistemological and methodological considerations, the purpose, and questions of the study, the case study has been selected as the most appropriate strategy for this study.

The principal goal of this research is to explore teachers' and students' perspectives and beliefs regarding the issue of course design and the meanings they attach to. My intention behind that is to provide rich insights and develop multiple interpretations, patterns as an ontological stance (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Smith, 2003). For this, I need to gather detailed and thick information

from the participants about my case (Yin, 2009; 2005; 2003; Stake, 2000; 2005; Merriam, 2002; 1988).

## **SAMPLING**

Since this research is qualitative, the sampling must be purposeful, which means selecting participants who can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The purposeful sampling in this research is represented by a group of teachers belonging to a particular context within the field of TESOL, department of English at a tertiary institution in Oman.

The sample of teachers involves nine teachers who teach a variety of EFL/EAP courses at the undergraduate level. Most of the participants have a minimum of five-year experience in TESOL, particularly in teaching and designing (or redesigning) their courses. Having good experience in this area indicates that they can reflect on their perspectives and beliefs. The advantage of selecting experienced individuals will, in turn, support the goal of providing highly comprehensive and meaningful findings (Ritchie et al., 2014; Dornyei, 2011; Punch, 2009; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; 1994).

## **METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

The main source of data collection for this study is the semi-structured interviews that depend on open-ended questions set up within an interview guide (Kvale, 2006). The author followed a professional protocol including procedures of "thematizing" and "designing" the questions to be asked in accordance with the main research questions and purpose of study (Dorny, 2011: 173). Table 1 below includes the open-ended questions that have been designed according to the main research questions.

The author met each participant individually and faced to face for one to two hours with short breaks. Every interview was recorded by a digital voice recorder. In addition, the author took notes in her notebook immediately after the end of the interview, particularly notes about the body language and whether the interviewee was interested or not (Cohen et al., 2000; Kvale, 2006, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

**Table 1: Interview Guide**

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Interview questions</b>
<b>Q.1 How do teachers at a college context in Oman design their EAP courses?</b>	<p>*From your opinion, what do you think of the idea of designing courses by teachers?</p> <p>* Is it a good idea to design the courses you teach? Why? Why not?</p> <p>* Generally, how do you design the courses you teach?</p> <p>* What do you think the basic components of a course are? Why?</p> <p>* How do you determine the content of a course?</p> <p>* How do you select the topics of a course? On what basis?</p> <p>* What kind of materials do you prefer to select for your course?</p> <p>How do you formulate the goals of a course? And on what basis?</p> <p>* How do you organize your course? How do you start, develop, and end?</p>
<b>Q.2 What is the best way to develop a holistic contextualized model of EAP course design at a higher education context?</b>	<p>* How do you design courses that are holistic and more contextualized?</p> <p>* Do you have any suggestions for teachers working within TESOL area for improving the process of course design?</p>

## THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS

The data were analyzed qualitatively, relying on Miles and Huberman's model (1994) and Miles, et al. (2013) in addition to other basic analytical techniques from other models such as Creswell (2007), and Lincoln and Guba (1985). The data that was collected from the interviews passed through three stages of analysis: "data reduction," "data display," and "conclusion

drawing/verification." In the data reduction stage, the data were first categorized according to the two research questions.

The data were then deductively categorized according to the research questions. Under each category, the emergent themes from the data after analysis are grouped, defined, and displayed. Then, after collecting the data from interviews, I transformed them in the form of written texts supported by direct quotes from the participants. The third stage involves coding the data. In this study, the process of coding begins with reviewing the transcribed data word by word and line by line within each particular answer of each interview to decide which segment that implies important information to include and which segment that is irrelevant to pull out. After reviewing and reflecting on the transcribed data, codes, or labels were assigned below or beside each word or segment to describe the aspects of the content.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS AND STUDIES**

This section presents in detail the findings emerging from the teachers' interviews data. The findings are organized into two sections described in terms of Question One and Question Two (for details about the questions of study see table 1). The section presents a variety of emerging themes that have emerged supported by the teachers' own words in the form of quotes from the interview transcript.

### **Q.1 How do teachers at a tertiary institution in Oman design their EAP courses?**

#### **Theme One: Course Design is a Process of Prioritizing Learning Elements**

When the teachers were asked the question "how do you design the EAP courses that you teach?" they provided a variety of views and beliefs. Overall, the data show that the teachers conceptualized course design as a process of prioritizing and articulating the essential learning elements. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable variation among their responses regarding which element to start with and which element to prioritize. The majority of participants prefer to start with addressing students' needs, while a few of them prefer to start with one of the basic elements like learning objectives or materials design. Generally, teachers' responses might be categorized in terms of four priorities, as shown below:

Priority one-starting with students' needs

Priority two-starting with methodology (beliefs about how to teach)

Priority three-focuses on conceptualizing content (sequencing materials and integrating language skills)

Priority four-starting with learning objectives

By prioritizing elements, they mean giving some elements of high value due to their importance in shaping the course. This theme leads us to draw two interpretations. The first interpretation is that course design is not a static or standard process as has been portrayed in the frameworks and models of course design, as shown in the literature review chapter. Rather, teachers portrayed course design as a dynamic process offering teachers and course designers more flexibility regarding the starting point and the mechanism of articulating the elements of a course. The second interpretation is that there is no linear mechanism when articulating the elements. The teachers in this case study agree with Graves regarding the issue of sequencing the components of a particular course.

### **Theme Two: Students' Needs as a Key Element in Course Design**

The results have shown that the teachers provided a variety of perspectives regarding students' needs. Therefore, the findings obtained from teachers' perceptions will be grouped in terms of three categories: the importance of addressing students' needs, analysis of students' needs, and procedures of needs analysis.

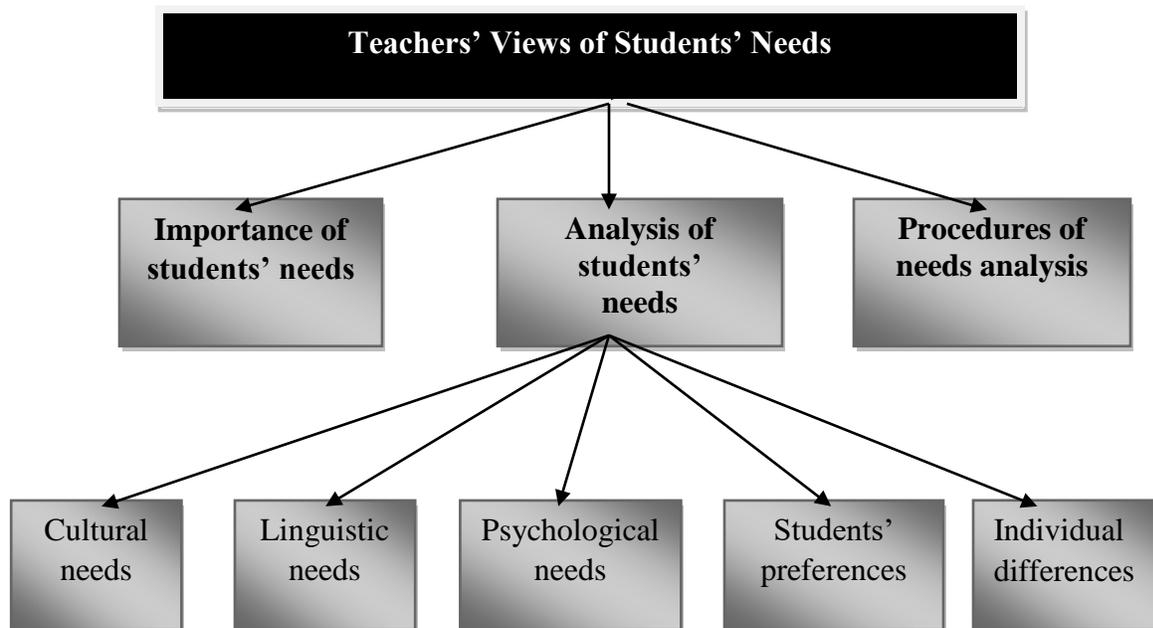
With regard to the category of the importance of students' needs, the majority of teachers reported that addressing students' needs is considered as a key factor that contributes to the efficiency and practicality of course design. For example, the participant (S) emphasized the importance of students' needs describing this element as "the driving force" that leads to building up the whole course. Similarly, the participant (M) considered it as the starting stage, saying that "If I want to design a course, first of all, I should start with students' needs analysis." Two other participants (A and M) believe that considering students' needs from the beginning of course design saves teachers the trouble of designing irrelevant courses that do not respond to what students need. In this regard, two other participants reported that students' needs must be addressed from the beginning; otherwise, "the teacher may expect the risk of conflict between what students need and what is already prepared" (M).

In addition, four teachers (F, M, N, and R) believe that addressing student needs helps determine the articulation of other elements such as materials design, content, methodology, and learning objectives. For example, the participant (N) states that he takes the element of students' needs into account because it helps teachers to find the materials and methodology that are suitable for students. In this regard, he focused on two types of students' needs: their language level and their preferences. Likewise, the participant (R) designs his courses on the basis of what students need. He focused on "their abilities, their deficiencies, and their preferences" that in light of which he selects his materials.

The second category of teachers' perceptions concerns the analysis of students' needs based on factors that are socio-cultural, educational, and psychological. Culturally, one participant (A) reported that "It is very important to consider students' culture when designing an EFL/EAP course." Linguistically, two teachers (A and N) argued that teachers must take into

consideration “the students’ language proficiency level” (A) saying that “I need to take into consideration... what kind of level the students have because this is going to help me find the material that is suitable for students, not just providing information”. Participant (W), on the other hand, showed his interest in focusing on individual differences regarding students’ skills of fluency when he said, “I need to understand the students’ ... needs, and who are the skillful students? Their fluency is important... So I give them special material to improve their fluency”. Participant (S) considered psychological factors that influence her methodology, explaining that students’ needs can shape classroom practice. Her argument is based on the rationale that teaching language is difficult, and therefore we should think of “classroom motivation.”

The third category of teachers’ perceptions involves the procedures followed for analyzing students’ needs. Since there is no formal procedure in the department concerned with analyzing students’ needs, teachers (like A, L, N, F, R, and S) said that they do it individually. For example, two participants (M and W) reported that they do it “by questionnaire or by asking the students what they studied before or what they prefer” (M) or “by asking students direct questions and conducting interviews” (W). The other participants said that they do by means of classroom observation and their daily interaction with students.



**Figure 3: Teachers’ Views of Students’ Needs**

The finding of prioritizing students’ needs has several interpretations. First, it reflects teachers’ awareness of students’ needs as an essential component and factor in the process of course design. Second, within this finding, it has been noticed that in this setting there is no official

procedure for the assessment of students' needs neither at the institution level, nor at the teacher level. Rather, teachers do it individually based on their beliefs and critical reflections at the course level. This individuality in addressing students' needs has resulted in a variety of evaluations and analyses of students' needs reflecting teachers' various focuses. For example, some teachers focused on students' language proficiency level, while others focused on their preferences, and a few of them focused on their cultural background. Accordingly, we can interpret that in this context, the notion of students' needs is shaped and influenced by teachers' beliefs, and both are two interrelated factors in course design.

The variety in teachers' analyses of students' needs leads to a third interpretation that these teachers take into account the two important types of students' needs, the objective, and subjective needs. Analysis of students' cultural background and their language proficiency indicate teachers' concerns with objective needs that stand for the 'target needs' represented by 'necessities' and 'lacks' (Hutchinson and waters, 1991). In addition, teachers' concerns with students' interests and preferences indicate their concerns with students' subjective needs. Taking into account students' needs, both the objective and the subjective is a crucial issue that helps teachers to avoid the risk of having courses that conflict with what students need or like. As reported above, teachers' beliefs in this respect correspond to the theoretical perspectives of many specialists in curriculum design (like Graves, 2000; Richards 2007; Dudely-Evans and ST John 2004; Nunan, 1988; Flowerdew, J. and Peacock, 2001) who believe that in order to produce successful courses, the teachers must play a crucial role in adjusting their teaching and selection of materials to their students' needs and interests.

### **Theme Three: Articulation of the Basic Elements of Course Design?**

Results revealed that teachers in this context perceive course design as a process of articulation of three basic course components: learning objectives, content, and material selection.

**Learning objectives**-When teachers were asked about how they develop their course objectives; they responded in different ways that can be categorized into three groups. Two participants prefer the idea of setting up the learning objectives by the department when designing their courses. Four participants, however, prefer to develop the objectives of their courses by themselves, taking into consideration the contextual factors, students' needs, and other institutional factors. The third category involves four teachers (A, F, L, and N) whose views are different from those in category two as they do not prefer to develop the goals and objectives according to their own beliefs and experiences. Rather, they prefer to integrate the objectives previously set up by the department with the objectives they develop based on what they contextually believe is important for their students.

According to the above finding, we can conclude that at the course level, there is some flexibility for teachers in formulating the learning objectives. In addition, most teachers prefer to be engaged in developing the objectives of a course. Their decision is based on the reason

that they are dissatisfied with the objectives set up by the department, and as such, they have to develop the objectives in accordance with students' needs. This belief corresponds to Brown's argument about developing goals and objectives on the basis of students' needs and situation analysis. Brown points out that "the process of converting students' needs into goals and objectives provides the basic units that can, in turn, be used to define and organize all teaching activities into a cogent curriculum" (1995: 75).

**Conceptualizing the Course Content Based on Teachers' Decision-** Overall, results indicated that teachers conceptualize course content in terms of topic selection. They further argued that the selection of topics must be made according to the students' needs. However, they showed a variety of views regarding the selection of content or topics depending on students' needs, particularly their interests and preferences. Other teachers, on the other hand, argued that it would not be a good idea to be more responsive to students' preferences and interests when selecting the topics of a course. Instead of being very responsive, they would better think of considering criteria such as practicality, familiarity, simplicity, variety, suitability, and alignment. With regard to the criterion of practicality, one participant noted that "the class will be more engaging if the focus is on providing activities and topics that engage students in class discussions and participation". In terms of familiarity, three participants argued that they should choose topics that "are familiar to students." With regard to simplicity, he added that his students are more concerned about the exam, and as such, they prefer easy topics- that are within the basics rather than the advanced level in order to pass the exam easily. For this, he said, "but the idea is that they have in mind the exam.

With respect to the criterion of suitability, the participant (W) raised a crucial issue advocating that teachers in this context have to be aware of whether the topic is culturally and socially suitable or not to the classroom context. In this regard, he argued that "we must take into consideration everything such as selecting videos, listening, and selecting topics. For example, I avoid such topics as clothes design, kissing, or dating".

Based on teachers' views, we understand that they perceive the conceptualization of the content as a matter of choosing and sequencing certain topics or themes for a particular subject. Furthermore, they believe that the process of selecting a course content is influenced by the key factor of students' needs. Teachers' perceptions support Nation and Macalister's belief on the relationship between deciding a course content and considering learners' needs. In this respect, Nation and Macalister (2010) point out that needs analysis is directed mainly at the goals and content of a course. Nation and Macalister also agree with the teachers' views regarding the criteria of adaptation, alignment, and flexibility. In this respect, they state that "Making sensible, well-justified decisions about content is one of the most important parts of curriculum design. If poor content is chosen, then excellent teaching and learning result in a poor return for learning effort" (2010: 71).

### **Materials Selection Based on Teachers' beliefs**

When the participants were asked about how they select their materials and on what basis, they all said that they rely on the textbook. However, they supplement it with other materials such as power points, videos, and worksheets. One participant (R) was exceptional since he said that "I mainly rely on the textbook".

Some teachers described how they use supplementary materials taking into consideration students' needs. They reported that when they use the supplementary materials, they think of aspects such as integration, creativity, alignment, objectivity vs. subjectivity, and adaptation to meet the students' needs. For example, one participant explained how she integrates the textbook and the supplementary materials, pointing out, "I develop my own materials. I try to use the book... I try to make a combination between the textbook and my materials". Three other participants emphasized 'alignment' as an important aspect when using supplementary materials along with the textbook. From their perspectives, alignment must be done according to the goals and learning objectives of a course. For instance, the participant (A) reported that "When I choose the materials... I should see that the topics are related to the course... Sometimes we choose topics, but they are unrelated to the course.... So, we should suit them to the course aims and to the students...".

One participant prefers the idea of adaptation in choosing supplementary materials. He prefers to adapt the materials "according to the learners' needs and interests". He stated that students in this context prefer materials that provide tasks and activities more than theoretical discussions and reviews available in some sources and books.

Based on what is reported above we understand that from the teachers' perspectives, material development is not merely a matter of using textbooks. Rather it is a matter of making decisions and options in order to present materials that go in line with goals and objectives and serve to satisfy students' needs. This is compatible to what Graves' perspective (2000, p.156), which states that "...an important aspect of materials development is making choices... you need to make choices based on what you want your students to learn according to your goals and objectives and your syllabus focus".

The advantages of using supplementary materials are represented in the reasons mentioned earlier, such as alignment, adaptation, and satisfying students' needs. An interesting comment is provided by participant (F) who believes in the value of supplementary materials for the intention of improving students' creativity. In this respect, teachers' views are supported by specialists' views in curriculum design (like Kuzborska, 2011; Tomlinson, 2003; Dudley-Evans and ST. Johns, 2004; Richards, 2007; McGrath, 2002, 2013; McDonald, 2006; McDonough et al., 2013) who encourage teachers to create their own materials or at least combine textbooks and other sources of materials. In addition, teachers' use of supplementary materials supports the idea of "providing variety" of materials in classroom learning (Dudley-Evans and St. John,

2004). Variety is important, particularly in ESP/EAP classroom learning, in order to avoid “the danger of the ESP class becoming rather a dry affair that fails to motivate learners” (ibid: 177). Second, teachers’ decision to use supplementary materials signals the importance of contextualization in course design (Moghaddas, 2013; McDonough et al., 2013; McDonald, 2006; Block, 1991). In relation to materials design, contextualization means adjusting materials to be contextually suitable to the classroom taking into consideration socio-cultural and political dimensions (Block, 1991; Graves, 2000; Richards, 2007).

## **Q.2 What is the best way to develop a holistic contextualized model of an EAP course at a higher education context?**

As for the second question of the study, teacher participants provided a range of views and suggestions reflecting their perspectives regarding the process of designing holistic contextualized courses. Their answers to this question, along with the answers they have provided for the first question, may contribute to completing the purpose of understanding how teachers in this study conceptualize the process of EAP course design. Overall, teachers’ views and suggestions indicated that the process of course design is determined by two key strategies that are institutional and individual.

### **Theme One: Institutional Strategies**

Concerning the institutional factors, six teachers suggested that they need guidance and support from the institution and department. Specifically, they suggested forming a committee that is specialized in curriculum design. They believe that course design is a sophisticated process that involves, in addition to the articulation of the basic elements, a consideration of certain factors that are out of their control. The belief within this suggestion does not support to a large extent the belief held by Graves (2000) and other scholars (like Elliot, 1994; Pajares, 1992; Richards, 2007) who emphasize teachers’ involvement in curriculum design. However, the literature shows another argument proposed by several scholars (like Barth, Fullan, Giroux, Ornstein and Hunkins, Young, 1979 in Handler, 2010:34) who call for the limitation of teachers’ leadership or engagement in curriculum design. Those scholars based their views on the assumption that curriculum engagement or leadership requires a general understanding of a variety of psychological, cognitive, socio-cultural, and communicative factors. Furthermore, teachers must be familiar with theoretical knowledge about curriculum design in order to successfully fulfill their requirements.

### **Category Two: Adaptation strategies at the Individual Level**

This category involves strategies to be considered by teachers. From teachers’ perspectives, adaptation means making decisions such as flexibility, suitability, usefulness, and modification with the intention of producing courses matching students’ needs and preferences. This finding reflects teachers’ openness or willingness in existing adaptation or adjustment in course design

at different stages of course design, particularly at the level of topics, materials, and methodology. The strategy of adaptation has been emphasized by experts in the curriculum area (Graves, 2000; Richards, 2007; Brown, 1995), who advocate that teachers need to be aware of the notion of adaptation across all stages of course design. Based on the syntheses of teachers' views gained from data analysis, I have sketched an analytical framework of course design. In addition, the framework draws on a theoretical stance, including views and perceptions of scholars specialized with curriculum design. Figure 5 below illustrates this framework.

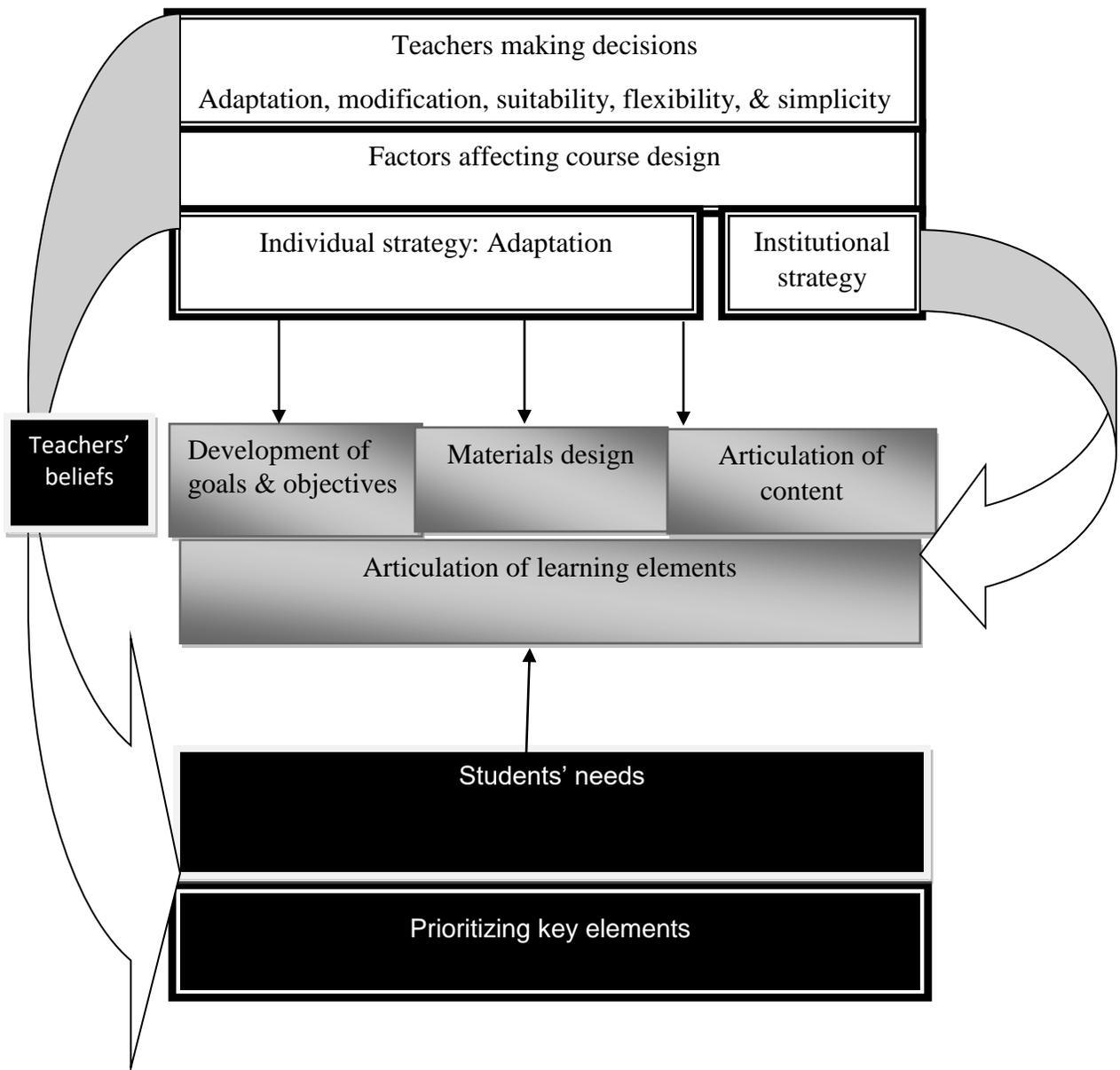


Figure 4: A Model of Course Design Based on Teachers' Perspectives

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aims to understand the views and beliefs of a group of teachers in a particular EAP context where they act as both teachers and course designers. More specifically, the study aims to understand how these teachers design the courses they teach. The study has resulted in a good number of findings and key themes carrying with them specific implications that may be a great value for the institution where this study takes place and for teachers who are concerned with designing their EAP/EFL courses. The following discussion provides a brief outline of the key findings and themes.

Course design is a process of Prioritizing Learning Elements- Within the context of this study, teachers believe that course design is not a standard or static process. This is because course design is “a grounded process” (Graves, 2000:13) that mainly depends on the type of the context where it takes place. Accordingly, the manner of articulating a course and how it starts is different from context to a context in terms of students’ needs, socio-cultural issues, and institutional policy.

Designing EAP Courses Based on Students’ Needs- Teachers in this context believe that designing a particular course must start initially with addressing students’ needs to produce courses that are more efficient, focused, and relevant. This finding goes in line with experts’ views (such as Richards, 2007; Dudley Evans and St. John, 2004, Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Jordan, 1997; Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001) who believe that designing EAP courses is shaped and guided by the analysis or assessment of students’ needs. This implies that teachers who are concerned about designing their courses must be aware that students’ needs are elemental to designing EAP/EFL courses.

Articulation of the Basic Elements of Course Design- Teachers conceptualize course design as a process that is made up of some basic components such as materials design, selection of topics, and goals and objectives development. Overall, they believe that each of these components must be shaped in accordance with the context and students’ needs. This requires making decisions when they design or articulate any of the basic elements such as adaptability, suitability, flexibility, and alignment. The first implication from this finding is that making decisions helps teachers to produce courses that are relevant to students’ needs and desires. The second implication is that the process of course design is not fixed or static. Therefore, any changes or modifications when articulating any element are possible as long as they contribute to satisfying students’ needs.

Teacher involvement and teacher beliefs-This is the second category of findings.

In terms of advantages, teachers’ involvement in the process of course design helps them produce effective and practical courses for students. Basically, this is due to their familiarity with the context of work (Graves, 2000; Richards, 2007; Farrell, 2008). The context is

considered as a key factor in determining many crucial issues and decisions relating to course design (Graves, 2000; Dubin and Olishtain, 1987; Yalden, 1987).

In the context of this study, the teachers are given the privilege of designing the courses they teach. This implies that the teachers are given enough flexibility and freedom to design their courses. Evidently, their familiarity with their context has enabled them to design courses based on their contextual beliefs and students' needs. Being familiar with their context has also enabled them to problematize the situation by identifying the challenges and problems that negatively impact the process of course design. Furthermore, it helped them to understand and analyze their students linguistically, culturally, and also pragmatically, that in the light of which they make options and decisions when designing courses.

In conclusion, course design is a complex, challenging, and demanding process determined by several principles and factors. Contextually speaking, teachers must have a role in designing or redesigning their courses. However, they must be theoretically component and knowledgeable in order to mediate between theory and practice. In addition, their beliefs need to be guided and shaped by supervision at the department level.

## LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The current study contributes to knowledge and research by investigating the issue of EAP course design qualitatively within the scope of language curriculum design. In spite of its contribution to knowledge and research, there are certain limitations that include the case study methodology, the size of sampling, and the number of interviews. It is a small-scale study with small groups of participants within a bound context. This has an impact on the issue of generalizability. Gathering data from multiple tertiary institutions would provide a large sample size in order to get more data to answer the research questions.

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