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LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND SYLLABUS DESIGN: THE NEED FOR A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

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THOSE who develop and direct foreign and second language instruction in United States postsecondary institutions may choose either grammar- or communication-based curricular models. At least three approaches merit discussion: the structural (or grammatical) approach, the situational approach, and the notional-functional approach.

The structural syllabus, still the most widely used, breaks language down into small grammatical components and presents them in strictly controlled sequence, building language competence through knowledge and internalization of linguistic rules (Knop). In Wilkins' words, the theoretical principle underlying this approach is that "you facilitate learning if you present the learner with pieces of language that have been pre-digested according to the categories found in a description of the language (*Notional Syllabuses* 3). Grammar makes up the core of the syllabus; grammatical patterns are clearly more important than vocabulary or the meaning expressed by examples.

Many learning principles implicit in a structural approach are sound: simple structures precede the more complex; those structures with fewer exceptions to the rule are introduced before patterns with more deviations; patterns follow a sequence of relative frequency in language use and proceed from the familiar to the unfamiliar according to a contrastive analysis between the native tongue and the target language. The structural syllabus also offers the presumed advantage that teachers need not be fluent in the language they teach, since grammatical explanations and drills do not require a high level of language proficiency. Teaching and testing are relatively simple, because we deal with discrete-point knowledge and skills. But few, if any, learners are able to gain language proficiency through discrete-point methods of teaching (Oller 229).

Proponents of communicative approaches to syllabus design maintain that a grammatical syllabus is neither necessary, efficient, nor effective in language learning. The shortcoming of the structural model is that language form takes precedence over meaning. This model emphasizes linguistic competence over communicative competence and offers language samples outside their social and cultural contexts, making transfer of learning from the classroom to the real world rather difficult. A further drawback, as Wilkins points out, is its effect on motivation. While some learners might see value in long-term grammar study for the benefit of future performance, many students want an immediate return for their efforts (*Notional Syllabuses* 3).

The situational syllabus recognizes that language is always used in a social context that influences meaning and therefore uses a series of situations (usually in dialogue form) that the learners are most likely to encounter when traveling abroad, such as finding a room, ordering a meal, buying stamps, traveling by train, or getting around town. Wilkins considers this type of syllabus more efficient and more motivating than the grammatical syllabus because it centers on practical needs rather than abstract analysis. The shortcoming of the approach, however, as Wilkins points out, is that a physical situational setting such as "At the Post Office" or "In a Restaurant" does not necessarily predict the language forms that will be used (*Notional Syllabuses* 3). One may go into a restaurant not to order a meal but to ask directions to a nearby museum or to change money for a telephone call. While certain language functions will most likely occur in certain situational settings, physical setting cannot really predict language use. A further problem, not inherent in the situational approach but caused by its strong ties to the grammatical syllabus in many existing materials, appears in the "seeded" dialogues, which both illustrate recurrent grammatical patterns and present practical phrases for a situational context. Often these dialogues include discourse that would never be used in natural language. Thus, language as practiced in the classroom and language as spoken in the real world often have little in common.

A situational syllabus, particularly if it is not tied to a grammatical progression, is probably most appropriate for short-term special-purpose courses: giving prospective tourists survival skills or preparing service personnel, such as waiters or waitresses, to deal with routine requests or fire fighters to handle emergency situations. It has limited potential for the language learner interested in acquiring global language proficiency.

The notional-functional syllabus is primarily based not on a linguistic analysis but on an analysis of learners' social and/or vocational communicative needs. The

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notional-functional concept originated in Europe in the early seventies through the efforts of the Council of Europe. Language notions and functions were studied to devise a unit-credit system for adult language learners who need to become functional in a language, usually outside the traditional school curriculum.[1] A notional syllabus is based on the premise that communication is meaningful behavior in a social and cultural context that requires creative language use rather than synthetic sentence building. Content, meaning, and context take priority over form. Grammatical structures are taught not as an end in themselves but as a means of carrying out communicative functions such as evaluating, persuading, arguing, informing, agreeing, questioning, requesting, expressing emotions. The syllabus also deals with semantico-grammatical notions such as time, quantity, space, location, motion, agent.[2]

Barnett lists the following characteristics of notional-functional approaches:

1. a functional view of language focusing on doing something through language;
2. a semantic base, as opposed to a grammatical or a situational base;
3. a learner-centered view of language learning;
4. a basis in the analysis of learner needs for using language that is reflected in goals, content selection and sequencing, methodology, and evaluation;
5. learner-centered goals, objectives, and content organization reflecting authentic language behavior and offering a spiraling development of content;
6. learning activities involving authentic language use; and
7. testing focused on ability to use language to react to and operate on the environment (43).

She explains further that a notional-functional approach focuses on

(a) sentences in combination instead of the sentence as the basic unit in language teaching;
(b) meaning over form;
(c) relevance of what is taught for meeting the immediate and future language needs of learners;
(d) participation in authentic language use; and
(e) effectiveness, fluency, and appropriateness in learner performance over formal accuracy (44).

A notional-functional syllabus enables students to use the language actively in limited contexts outside the classroom right from the beginning. It also promotes language variation and creativity, since students may choose a variety of expressions and a number of grammatical patterns for each communicative function.[3]

Critics point out that communicative syllabi and notional syllabi in particular may only prepare for tourist-level activities and, more seriously, may hamper further language study by not emphasizing linguistic accuracy. They warn that deemphasizing form and concentrating on meaning may lead to irreversible error fossilization (Higgs and Clifford).

Some overzealous foreign language educators who have uncritically "gone communicative" all the way, forcing students into premature language production without error correction, have probably done more harm than good. And there is the danger that some well-meaning "progressives" may use a notional-functional approach as an audio-lingual drill method. Instead of memorizing and reciting dialogues and grammatical patterns, students memorize and recite lists of various phrases to fulfill communicative functions. Sound syllabus design must recognize that semantic and linguistic considerations are irrevocably interrelated and that no approach can deal exclusively with either grammatical patterns or situational settings or communicative language. In the final analysis we are still studying words and configurations of words that express specific meanings, depending on who says what to whom, how, when, why, and in what social context.

Learner needs should play an important role in syllabus decisions. As Germaine points out, an analysis of learner needs is in essence a description of the circumstances in which the language will eventually be used. Such decisions might be relatively easy to make if the needs of the learners were homogeneous and predictable (e.g., in courses focusing on immediate survival needs or job performance). In postsecondary academic instruction, however, most students have no immediate need to study a foreign language, and the challenge to the course designer is to predict the students' needs. In an academic setting the institutional objectives (i.e., what the institution wants the students to learn) are often more clearly defined than the learners' objectives (i.e., what they want to learn). Language courses, for instance, that fulfill humanistic course requirements by definition must focus on cultural awareness and insights into language and the process of communication, in addition to developing practical language skills.

The danger of a strictly communicative syllabus (be it based on situational or notional-functional considerations) is that it might lead to a premature arrest in the development of linguistic accuracy. Higgs and Clifford, for instance, point to the phenomenon of "terminal 2s" on the FSI oral interview.[4] "Terminal 2s" are individuals with a relatively highly developed vocabulary but low grammatical accuracy in the form of fossilized errors that can no longer be remedied, even through extensive instruction. The authors maintain that "fossilized structures are a chronic problem among street learners of languages, such as students or servicemen stationed overseas" (68). In a language proficiency study of preservice language teachers at the University of Minnesota, Clifford found that

> Most terminal cases had begun their language training in unstructured overseas work or study settings, but some had had only school learning experiences. The terminal cases whose foreign-language background had included

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only an academic environment all came from language programs that either were taught by instructors who themselves had not attained grammatical mastery of the target language—and hence were unable to guide their students into correct usage—or by instructors who had chosen not to correct their students' mistakes for philosophical, methodological, or personal reasons.(68)

We should remember, however, that an argument can also be made against the grammatical syllabus, since the oral proficiency of few language learners who have learned through a structural approach but who lack an experience abroad exceeds a rating of 2 or 2+ on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency scale.[5]

I agree with Guntermann and Phillips that "the most appropriate approach to communicative course design is probably one that applies functional operations to a central framework of grammatical form and structure" ("Communicative Course Design" 329). Such an integrated approach, which brings the best grammatical and functional models to second language teaching and learning, would permit immediate language use in communicative situations but would not disadvantage those learners who wish to become fluent in the foreign language. Unfortunately, few commercially available instructional materials facilitate adoption of such an integrated curriculum design. Individuals in charge of language programs must still adapt and adjust existing materials to include both structural and notional-functional components.[6]

But, aside from the mix of grammatical and notional-functional content, other issues need to be addressed in curriculum design. The language learning process is strangely neglected in the prolific discussions of the pros and cons of various curricular models. We hear about analyses of language functions, of grammar, of communicative constraints, and so on, but seldom do the discussions include psycholinguistic considerations such as second-language-learning processes and strategies and constraints within the learning situation that affect language mastery.

Krashen's Monitor Model, for instance, has important implications for curriculum design for adult second language learners in formal instructional settings (*Second Language Acquisition*). Krashen maintains that two approaches are available for gaining proficiency in a second language: language learning and language acquisition. "Learning" is a conscious, slow processing of structural rules that usually takes place in a formal classroom setting. "Acquisition" refers to the subconscious mechanisms through which children learn their native tongue. Acquisition does not necessitate limited input of graded grammatical sequences, although there is evidence that not all grammatical patterns are mastered simultaneously and that there is a fairly stable order of mastery of grammatical structures. Acquisition takes place in "natural" environments, that is, in communicative situations outside the classroom. Comprehensive input (exposure to meaningful language use in communicative interactions) is considered the most crucial ingredient for language acquisition.

While acquisition is the only system available to children in learning their native tongue or any second language, adults have both systems available for developing second language ability. Krashen points out, however, that although only acquired language can be used spontaneously in communication, consciously learned language rules can serve as monitors for self-correction.

Monitor use depends on personal variables of the learners. There are monitor overusers, those poor, conscientious, and inhibited souls who are petrified of making a mistake and who subvocally recite conjugation patterns before using a verb or—if they do dare to say something—constantly correct their output so that it is difficult to keep track of the message they want to convey. And we are also familiar with monitor underusers, those happy-go-lucky creatures who couldn't care less about case systems, tenses, adjective endings, syntactical patterns, or other grammatical paraphernalia. They convey their messages by speaking in infinitives and may indicate past events by motioning backwards with their hands. They consistently flunk grammar tests but have few problems surviving in a natural language setting.

Krashen hypothesizes that formal and informal environments contribute to mastery in different ways and that the best setting for adult language learning is one that offers both learning and acquisition. We know through experience that learning alone (i.e., the grammatical syllabus) is insufficient for gaining language mastery. Experience also tells us that exposure alone, without formal instruction and correction, is insufficient for adults and often leads to error fossilization and pidginization of a language. If, however, the learning environment provides sufficient time, opportunities, materials, and activities both for formal learning and for the use of language in natural communicative situations, adult language learners can achieve high proficiency in a second language. Krashen maintains that acquisition occurs to the extent the target language is used realistically in the classroom. While learning increases the grammatical accuracy of a communicative exchange, semantic fluency develops only through acquisition.

One major tenet of Krashen's Monitor Model is that comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisition process; therefore, proficiency is directly related to the amount of comprehensible input provided. Young children learning a second language in a natural environment usually have no problem getting that input. For adult learners the situation is different, since most cultures frown on free interaction among adult strangers. Further, young children, when acquiring their

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native language and usually also when suddenly immersed in a foreign language environment, "go through a 'silent period' during which they build up acquired competence through active listening" ("Aptitude and Attitude" 157). What factors besides Krashen's model must be considered for sound syllabus design? I see at least four: time, amount of material, skill sequence, and the need to recycle materials to facilitate acquisition.

Language learning, particularly in a setting where the language is not naturally used as the language of communication, is a slow process. In Carroll's words, "attainment of skill in a foreign language is a function of the amount of time spent in its study" (137). Given the limited time at our disposal, instructional effectiveness and efficiency become major considerations for syllabus design.

Somewhere in the dark past of American foreign language education the myth of the two-year language curriculum was born.[7] It has held on tenaciously ever since. Although the Coleman report (1929) made some sensible recommendations about what can be accomplished in two years of foreign language study in a school setting, the report was (and is) largely ignored, and unrealistic, unrealizable promises of "mastery" or "proficiency" in the four skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension, and writing) still head the list of many departmental goal statements. Even if we forgot about our humanistic goals for the liberal arts requirement (e.g., cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, insights into language systems and the process of communication) and could focus exclusively on skills development, two hundred clock hours (i.e., four four-credit semester courses or 240 fifty-minute periods) of classroom instruction are insufficient for all but basic survival skills. We have to convince administrators, students, and the general public that an instructional setting and a time allotment appropriate for teaching history, mathematics, or geography are not necessarily appropriate for gaining proficiency in a foreign language. A number of studies and reports show that the nontraditional time arrangements in intensive or immersion instruction are more successful in developing proficiency than the traditional one-hour-per-day curriculum.[8]

Related to the need for different time parameters is the need to reassess the amount of content in terms of knowledge and skills mastery we expect from students. Davies likens our continuing search for new methods to the effort of trying to cram a quart of vegetables into a pint pot and—when unsuccessful—looking for a new method of packaging (461–67). He, like other foreign language educators, believes that we are trying to accomplish too much in too little time (see Valdman and Warriner). He advocates that, instead of reducing learning objectives across the board, we should give priority—at least during initial language instruction—to developing receptive skills. Psycholinguists have for years pointed to a natural sequence in language learning, emphasizing listening comprehension as a priority skill. But only in the past decade have experimental efforts investigated the effect of a receptive-to-productive skills sequence on second language acquisition. All point to a positive relation between language comprehension and language production (see Asher, Gary, Postovsky, and Winitz). Indeed, Nord warns that our premature emphasis on language production might have detrimental effects on language mastery. (If amount of comprehensible input is a major variable affecting fluency, this has serious implications for teacher certification. The lack of fluent teachers—particularly but not exclusively on the secondary level—approaches the scandalous.)

If we accept the importance of comprehension training in foreign and second language learning, we must restructure our syllabi to develop the receptive skills early, but we must strictly control the language we elicit for production, since "premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or free conversational setting before certain fundamental linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost" (Higgs and Clifford 74). Although native-language interference is now believed to play a lesser role in student errors than was thought during the heyday of audiolingualism, researchers maintain that such interference is strong when learners are called on to produce language patterns they have not yet acquired (see Krashen, "Aptitude and Attitude," and Newmark).

In essence, then, we need to teach students a reception grammar (sufficient recognition of patterns to avoid interference with comprehension of a message) and a production grammar (patterns for active use in oral or written communication). The receptive grammar can be taught more quickly and in greater depth than the productive grammar.

The last consideration concerns transforming a basically sequential curriculum (particularly if it follows structural principles) into a cyclical or concentric model. Corder makes a most convincing case when he states

> In language, nothing is learned completely until everything is learned. If this is so, then no simple linear sequence for a syllabus is appropriate. A logical solution to this problem might seem to be a cyclic, or spiral, structure, which required the learner to return time and time again to some aspect of language structure, language process, or domain of language use, in order to discover how it relates and is integrated with some different part of language. Foreign language is not just cumulative, it is an integrative process. (See also Guntermann and Phillips, *Functional-Notional Concepts*, and Brumfit.)

The structure of the traditional language curriculum—and each course within it—suggests that language learning is strictly sequential. In each chapter we teach, practice, test, and assume that students will

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"know" and remember forever a number of carefully sequenced phrases, vocabulary items, and structures.

Elsewhere I have written:

> In assessing student achievement, we are, unfortunately, too often confronted with the sad discovery that teacher input and student output are not identical (see fig. 1). Although our teaching materials and testing procedures do not often reflect that fact, language learning is not strictly a sequential process. Figure 2 attempts to show that it resembles more a spiral, concentric process, where components are constantly re-entered, reviewed, enlarged upon (forgotten), re-entered, reviewed, enlarged upon, etc. Our teaching as well as our testing need to take this re-entry/review/synthesis processing in language acquisition into account. ("Testing" 249–50)

Notional syllabi can perhaps be most effectively used in this recycling process since, according to Wilkins, they lend themselves particularly to a cyclic approach aimed at expanding progressively the learner's semantic repertoire (*Notional Syllabuses* 59).

In the final analysis, given the diversity of our learners, their needs, and the available instructional time, one syllabus or one curricular model is inadequate. Higgs and Clifford suggest that

> What may be needed is a two-track curriculum, with an unabashedly communicative syllabus for students whose terminal objective is to function marginally well in the target language, and a linguistic competence track for those who aspire to using the language professionally.

The authors warn, however, of a danger in such a two-track approach by pointing out that

> a student who completes the "communicative track" and has become genuinely excited about the target language may find it impossible to switch over. Evidence suggests that four semesters of instruction are enough to produce a terminal profile, and the time needed may in fact be even less than that. (75–76)

Obviously, in order to make the crucial decisions necessary for sound syllabus design, educators in charge of devising and coordinating language instructional programs must be aware of the many factors that influence foreign language learning.

NOTES

[1]For further information on the development of the notional-functional approach in Europe, see Wilkins, "Linguistic and Situational Content"; van Ek, *Threshold Level*; and Bung.

[2]For a tentative catalog of notions and functions, see Wilkins' *Notional Syllabuses* (21–54); for relatively complete inventories of language-specific notions and functions, see van

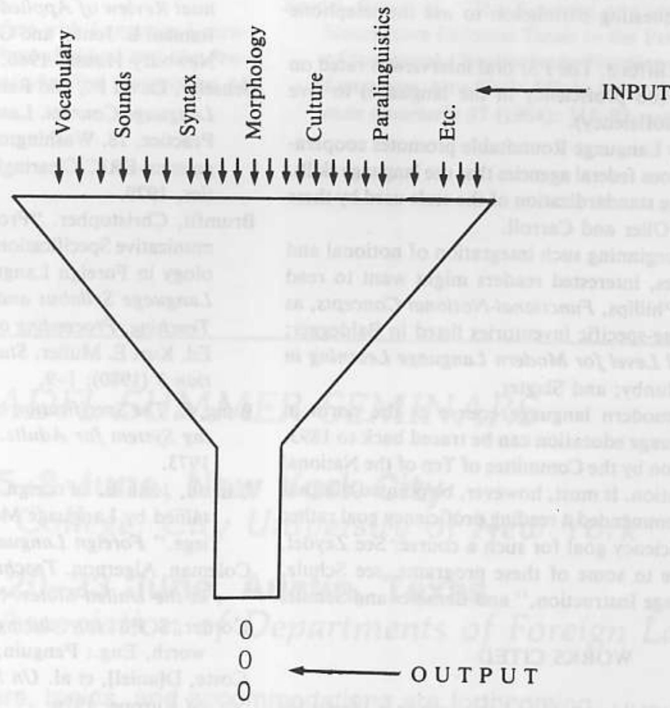

Figure 1

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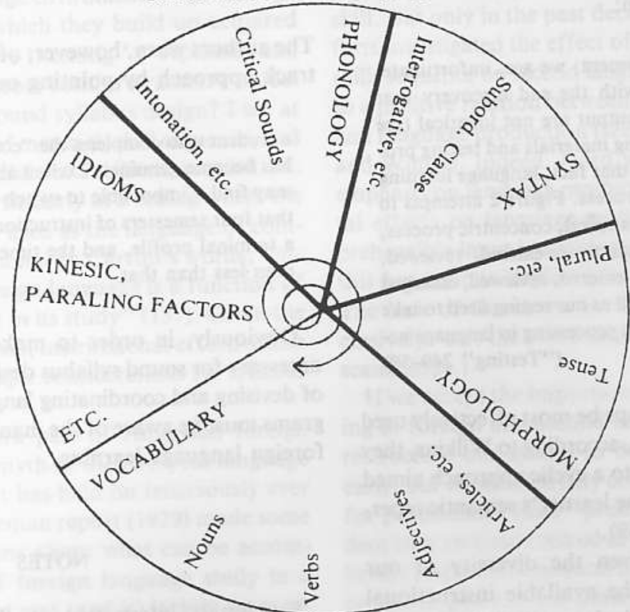
Concentric Model of Language Learning



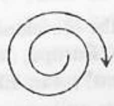
 = learner processing with constant re-entry and review of linguistic structures in communication practice as well as in tests.

Figure 2

Ek, *Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools*; Munby; Baldegger; Coste; and Slagter.

[3]In *Notional Syllabuses*, for instance, Wilkins lists 53 possibilities for requesting permission to use the telephone (60–61).

[4]See Higgs and Clifford. The FSI oral interview is rated on a scale from zero (no proficiency in the language) to five (educated native proficiency).

[5]The Interagency Language Roundtable promotes cooperation among the various federal agencies that use language skills. It seeks a continuing standardization of the scale used by these agencies. See also Oller and Carroll.

[6]As a point for beginning such integration of notional and structural principles, interested readers might want to read Guntermann and Phillips, *Functional-Notional Concepts*, as well as the language-specific inventories listed in Baldegger; van Ek, *Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools*; Coste; Munby; and Slagter.

[7]The two-year modern language course as the norm in United States language education can be traced back to 1893, to a recommendation by the Committee of Ten of the National Education Association. It must, however, be pointed out that the committee recommended a reading proficiency goal rather than an oral proficiency goal for such a course. See Zeydel.

[8]For a reference to some of these programs, see Schulz, "Intensive Language Instruction," and Benseler and Schulz.

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