

Teaching Without a Language Syllabus But With a Linguistic Focus

1. Background

The history of language teaching shows immense diversity in the ways in which people have perceived the nature of language learning. For this reason historical generalisations about the aims, methods and techniques of language teaching are inevitably subject to many exceptions. In spite of this it is not too far from the truth to say that one tradition has been historically dominant and indeed even to-day is probably more widely respected in the educational world than any other. According to this the essential content of foreign language teaching is found in the grammar and the lexicon of the language and language courses will in general be based upon a programme that introduces these in systematic linear fashion. It is true that, as views on the nature of learning change, the methods, techniques and materials used may undergo quite radical transformations. Methodologically there is a world of difference between an approach based upon explicit exposition of grammatical rules, which are then tested in exercises, and one based on exposure to selected, structural models which are then rehearsed intensively with the aim of promoting inductive learning. Nonetheless in spite of the diversity of methodological approach that the history of language teaching demonstrates, the centrality of the grammar and the lexicon in the linguistic definition of the aims has only occasionally been challenged. It is not stretching historical truth too far to say that this is the tradition that we have inherited.

In the 1970's we experienced a strong reaction against the grammatical (/lexical) syllabus. The growing emphasis on communication and, in linguistics, on communicative competence focus-

sed attention on the disparity between the grammatical knowledge of the learners and their frequent lack of communicative skill. For some the implication was that the detailed linguistic planning of language teaching should be abandoned. Others searched for an alternative basis for syllabus construction which reflected more accurately the communicative aspirations of the learners. It was the latter that led to the proposals for notional and/or functional syllabuses. According to these proposals decisions about the forms (grammatical and lexical) to be learned should be taken only in the light of a previous analysis of the semantic and social needs of the learners. Although notional syllabuses as such have remained scarce, the influence of the proposals has been very evident in the work of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project and in the design of numerous text-books, especially for the teaching of English as a foreign language.

The difference between grammatical and notional syllabuses derives from differing views of the nature of language or at least of what is essential linguistically in the learning of language. The grammatical syllabus is built upon the belief that mastering a language is mastering the features of sentence structure (syntax) and being able to operate them by means of a limited but relevant vocabulary. It is supposed that sentence meaning and communication are the same thing. The notional syllabus is predicated upon the belief that knowing a language is knowing how to produce socially purposeful acts of communication and that the relation between this and the language system is not a straight-forward one. In spite of this difference of view, however, one assumption remains shared. Whatever are held to be the key units of language are assumed ipso facto

also to be the units of pedagogical organisation. In the case of the grammatical syllabus language teaching is structured according to the more or less familiar units of grammatical analysis. In the case of the notional syllabus teaching units are designated in terms of the relatively less familiar semantic and functional categories which are believed to represent the range of communicative purpose expressible through language.

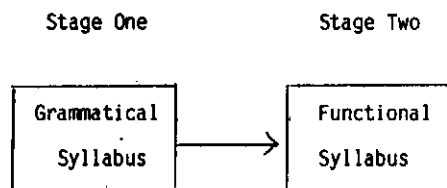
2. The debate

From the proposals for new types of syllabus made in the early 1970's stems a continuing discussion on general issues of syllabus design. On the one hand there has been an exploration of the feasibility of planning language teaching through the new categories. Are there soundly conceived criteria for selecting and sequencing the categories? What are the relations between them? On what basis might the forms which express the categories be identified and selected? Do these particular categories adequately capture what is important in a more communicatively oriented model of language? Should the categories be modified or incorporated into some larger model? More radically, can the character of what takes place in communication ever be captured by inventories of categories whether of this or some other sort? On the other hand there has been the attempt to relate the preoccupations of the notional syllabus with the concerns of the grammatical syllabus. Can a notional syllabus ensure that the learning of the grammatical system proceeds efficiently? Can grammatical criteria be used simultaneously with notional criteria? Can syllabuses be designed which contain both grammatical and notional units? If so, how

might these be arranged in respect of one another, in linear sequence, in parallel or in some other arrangement ?

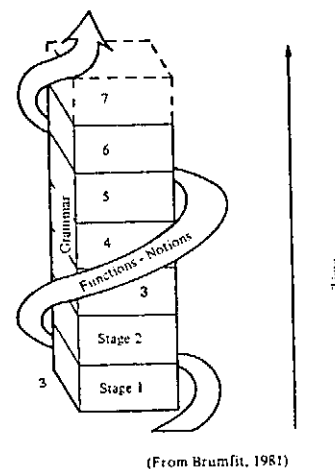
Given the range of the questions that can be asked and, indeed, the differing standpoints of the commentators, it is hardly surprising that the solutions that emerge in both the practical and the more theoretical literature are equally diverse. Without attempting to be comprehensive we can easily demonstrate the extent of the variety. Quite apart from a wholly notional or a wholly grammatical syllabus, a commonly advocated solution is one in which the early stages of teaching are grammatical/lexical as indicated in Figure 1 and the later stages functional (it being assumed that the modal and semantico-grammatical aspects of language have been effectively covered by the grammatical stage).

FIGURE ONE



Brumfit (1981), (see Figure 2)¹ proposes a graded grammatical core around which the functional/notional content is arranged in a spiral. Others have proposed a similar arrangement with the roles reversed, that is, a notional/functional core with ungraded grammatical material accompanying it but not providing the fundamental pedagogic structure.

FIGURE TWO



Valden (1983) cites the suggestions made by Allen (1980) for a structure with changing focus level by level. The syllabus shifts from an initial structural stage, through a functional stage to the final instrumental stage. (See Figure 3).

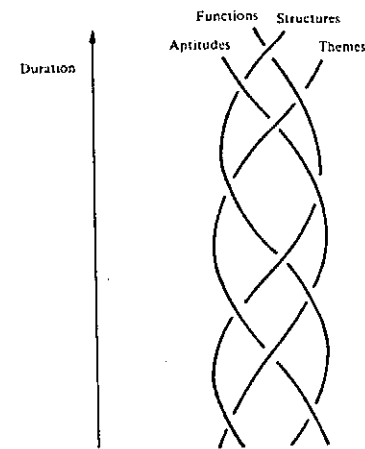
FIGURE THREE

Levels of Communicative Competence		
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Structural Focus on language (formal features)	Functional Focus on language (discourse features)	Instrumental Focus on the use of language
(a) Structural control	(a) Discourse control	(a) Situational or topical control
(b) Materials simplified structurally	(b) Materials simplified functionally	(b) Authentic language
(c) Mainly structural practice	(c) Mainly discourse practice	(c) Free practice

Three Levels of Communicative Competence in Second-Language Education (Allen, 1980).

She also cites Maley's (1981) model which incorporates several types of category into a braided structure (See Figure 4).

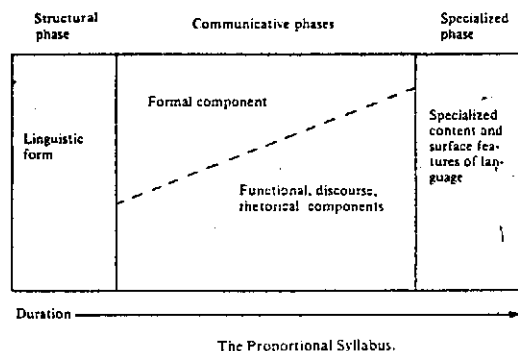
FIGURE FOUR



(From Maley, 1981).

Yalden's own proposal (See Figure 5) is for what she calls a proportional syllabus. It resembles the variable focus syllabus proposed by Allen. Yalden recognises three phases, the structural, the communicative and the specialized. Most originally, within the communicative phase there is a progressive shift of emphasis from the formal towards what she calls the functional, discourse, rhetorical components.

FIGURE FIVE



These examples certainly do not exhaust the possibilities. One thing which is noticeable about them is that they are all agreed that the needs of language teaching cannot be met either from a wholly grammatical or from a wholly notional syllabus. They therefore attempt to include both in a single syllabus (either concurrently or consecutively). Presumably some units would be found in the resulting courses with grammatical labels and others with notional or functional labels. In other words, authors still subscribe to the view that pedagogic units should be devoted to what are perceived to be the most important language units.

3. Challenges to the need for a pedagogic structure

The types of syllabus that we have discussed so far are all concerned with specifying and arranging the "things" to be learned. Inevitably the items to be learned will occur in a linear sequence and it must be supposed that these approaches are based on a theory of learning which holds that material to be learned can be mastered or accumulated piece-by-piece. (It is worth emphasizing however that they do not all assume that the categories of the linguistic system are acquired one-by-one. A functionally or notionally oriented course does not attempt to isolate and present grammatical structures or categories as coherent wholes. The individual items in this case are utterance or language-behaviour-types.) As we have noted above, the theory that the language content, however defined, needs to be set out in a syllabus as a series of items in linear sequence has been challenged by some writers. In part this challenge is based upon an interpretation of certain research which has been carried out in the last few years.

Observation of first and second language learners shows that acquisition of language under natural conditions (leaving aside the question of schooled learning for the moment) differs strikingly from the model that we aim at when we teach one structural element at a time. We assume that items should be introduced, practised and fully mastered before a learner can proceed to the next item in the sequence. In natural acquisition, by contrast, the process of learning is proceeding simultaneously in many different aspects of the language so that often a great deal is partially known but only very little is known perfectly. As mastery of different aspects of the language system emerges, it does so in an order - a broad developmental sequence - which is observed by most learners whatever the nature of their own language experience. The picture then is one in which the learner has available many different parts of the language system, but all at varying stages of development. Without wishing for the moment to speculate on the extent to which classroom learning can be expected to reflect the features of natural acquisition, we can at least observe that a system of teaching based on the strict application of the principle of learning the "parts" of complex behaviour individually first may well present those "parts" in a sequence which bears little resemblance to that observed in natural acquisition.

A second observation made on the basis of language acquisition research is that the natural language acquisition abilities of the child are probably not lost with age as was previously believed. An individual exposed to and needing to produce and comprehend a second language will acquire that language in much the same way as it is acquired by the young child

even without receiving any instruction in the language. One reason why the older second language learner is rarely as wholly successful as the young child is that his or her need for the language is often not as comprehensive as it is in the child. The French language immersion programmes for anglophone Canadians demonstrate well how far the need to use language creates the conditions for acquisition. Typically these programmes expect learning to take place entirely on the basis of use of French for teaching all subjects in the school and without any more structured intervention on the part of the teacher. By all accounts they are remarkably successful.

On the basis of this kind of evidence it is possible to have doubts about the value and necessity of a careful, pedagogically structured programme for the learning of a foreign language. On the evidence of natural sequences of acquisition, a pedagogically motivated sequence may do little to advance the process of acquisition and indeed may even hinder it. On the evidence of the individual's continuing capacity to learn through use it has been suggested that the necessary and sufficient conditions for learning will be created if we simply provide opportunities (and needs) for real communication in the second language. With use, it is said, acquisition will take care of itself.

4. Implications for language teaching

Interesting as the observations about acquisition and the operation of the individual's innate language learning capacities are, their significance for the planning of language teaching is still problematic. Most teachers are constrained to work with only a few hours a week at their disposal.

They are not free to introduce immersion programmes or otherwise able to increase significantly the hours of contact with the foreign language. Does the evidence support the view that in these circumstances the teacher should no longer intervene to structure or focus the learning but should seek above all to create an environment for the communicative use of the foreign language ?

This is not the place to attempt a detailed evaluation of the research on second language acquisition, but it is possible to say that it falls a long way short of demonstrating that under the normal conditions for foreign language teaching, for language learning to proceed efficiently, it is sufficient to create occasions for use of the language. The evidence cannot be regarded as convincing as long as there is doubt over the research methods that claim to show that pedagogically structured teaching has no effect upon acquisition and, more importantly still, as long as no research has been done directly into the effects of differing types of language input (including communicative use of the language) on the language output of the learners. There are no strong reasons at present or in the foreseeable future for the language teacher to abandon pedagogically motivated intervention in language learning.

However, even if we know little positively about the relation between linguistic input and output, there is increasingly convincing evidence of a negative kind that the linguistic programmes proposed by language teaching theoreticians and implemented by many language teachers do not correspond closely to the reality of acquisition by the individual. Although we may teach items in sequence, learning does not proceed strictly

according to the sequence in which things have been presented and indeed may well be exponential rather than strictly linear. From their pragmatic experience teachers know that much that is taught is not in practice well learned and that some aspects of a language, to which great attention is given, seem stubbornly to resist learning. Others, of course, are much more readily assimilated.

It may very well be that the type of structure that is adopted for the organisation of teaching and the exact sequence in which language items are introduced are actually rather unimportant and have little influence on learning. What may be important is that the structure of teaching should be such that it entails a balanced contact with the features of the language (and its use), particularly those which manifest its principal regularities, and that the teacher should be ready to create the opportunity for more intensive use of or exposure to those parts of the language system that he or she judges to be sources of important generalisations. In this way the learners at least perceive the nature of the linguistic goals whether or not they are yet ready to assimilate them.

What is being suggested is that the learners' language experience should be such that overall they have adequate contact with its phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, functional and textual features (if these are indeed the significant features in a 'balanced' view of language). It matters little where the focus lies at any one moment or what the structure is that has provided that contact. To this extent the designation of a syllabus as grammatical, notional, situational or whatever is misleading. A grammatical syllabus may

indeed be defective if the resulting materials and activities ignore, say, the functional and textual aspects of language. Similarly a notional syllabus will not produce an effective linguistic competence if it leads to neglect of grammatical and lexical aspects of language. However it should not be beyond the bounds of ingenuity to adopt a basically grammatical or notional syllabus for a course but to exploit that syllabus in such a way that due attention is given to the other features of language at the same time. A course with a core content made up of grammatical items is in no way precluded from introducing functional language material at the same time. A functionally structured course contains grammatical items that can easily be exploited pedagogically.

5. A fundamental misunderstanding

At this point it is becoming clear that the one basic assumption that has been made by all who have participated in the debate about syllabuses is open to question. We have all assumed that, armed with a view of what it is that is important in language, the task of the designer of language courses is then to set up a structure for language teaching (i.e. a syllabus) which reflects that view directly. If the sentence is all-important, the units of teaching should have grammatical aims. If illocutionary force is all-important, the units of teaching should be designated in illocutionary terms. And so on. In practice the way in which we choose to organise a language course and our linguistic analysis of the components of the language behaviour at which we are aiming need not be the same thing at all. It is essential that we should have a well-informed view of the nature of language and of the particular fea-

tures of the language in question, but it does not follow that the organisational units of teaching should be derived from our perception of these essential components of language. The language teaching units could indicate the ostensible preoccupation of the syllabus (course) but the true linguistic aims could be met from the way in which the language content of a unit is exploited and not by the prior adoption of an explicit linguistic syllabus. If this is the case, it is no longer crucial what kind of syllabus we have and it may not be important to have a language syllabus at all. The debate of the last decade over the relative priorities of different features of language within a language teaching syllabus has been concerned with a non-issue.

6. Thematic syllabus, linguistic focus

Once one has recognized that decisions about the structure of language courses are separate from decisions about the model of language that will guide the teacher in determining how to maintain the balance of language activities and which specific features of language merit close attention, each type of decision can be looked at in its own way. I am inclined to the view that the role of the ostensible content is to motivate, interest and even provide an intellectual challenge to the learners. The best way of achieving this may well be to structure language teaching in terms of themes chosen to match the age, maturity, character, aim and so on of the learners. The themes can be presented through texts, both written and spoken, both authentic and non-authentic. Any such texts are a suitable basis for reading and listening activities in themselves but the learners' own contributions to the theme provide opportunities

for purposeful speaking and writing.

Since thematically inspired material will not have been chosen to illustrate particular linguistic features of the foreign language (though this does not mean that materials used with beginners or near-beginners should not be edited to reduce their complexity), any texts used in association with a given theme will inevitably produce a range of language. It is the role of the teacher then to focus on those elements in this range which he or she wishes to exploit for pedagogic purposes. If the source material includes a dialogue, that dialogue may readily provide a starting-point for more clearly focussed attention (exposition, practice) on, say, certain functional or intonational features of the language. Virtually any material can be a source for grammatical extension. Conversation or continuous written text can be exploited to point to textual features of the language. The focussing and the involvement of the learners may be achieved in different ways-teacher exposition, drilling, role-plays - according to the methodological convictions of the teacher. The process does not need to be based on some previously established grammatical, functional, or phonological syllabus. What is important, however, is that all features of language, not just the grammatical or just the functional should be covered and it is in this that the skill of the teacher or the materials' producer lies. If the right balance is not achieved, the results will be no better than those from a syllabus-based course where the syllabus is derived from a too narrowly conceived model of language. The teacher will need to keep a careful record of the linguistic topics which have been pedagogically exploited to ensure that overall the right balance is achieved and that coverage is comprehensive

or, if a course is of short duration, that focus has been on the most cost-effective items.

One great advantage of a thematic approach is the extent of its adaptability to local circumstances and differing educational philosophies. It can be an extremely flexible approach. Where classes are relatively small, students mature, co-operative and open-minded, teachers extremely proficient in the language, pedagogically skilful and free from the pressures of over-loaded timetables and where relevant language resources are readily available and considerable initiative is allowed to institutions and to individual teachers and students groups within each institution, it is possible to envisage an extremely flexible approach in which teachers and students combine to decide both the nature of the themes which are of interest and the way in which they will be handled. Local initiative is rarely possible to this extent. At the opposite extreme, students may lack maturity and intrinsic motivation teachers may teach long hours, may have a poor practical command of the language and may have been provided with inadequate pedagogic skills. The necessary resources for a flexible thematic approach may be wholly lacking either within or outside the institution and the need within the educational system for a general standardization of approach may remove all initiative from the teachers and require that they conform to centrally determined norms. In this case both the thematic source material and the pedagogic exploitation will be provided for the class teacher in the form of text books, tapes or other teaching aids. Fortunately the reality of language teaching is usually somewhere between these two extremes. In most situations considerable preparation of material is necessary in advance so that continual negotiation of aims, content and techniques is not possible. On the other

hand there is ample opportunity for adaptation and supplementation of pre-structured material so that teaching can nonetheless remain responsive to feed-back from learners and thematic source material can be continually up-dated.

7. Summary

It is argued that in recent years our view of what are, for the foreign language learner, the significant features of language has been considerably extended. For some years we have been deeply involved in a debate on the way in which language syllabuses should be designed to reflect this extension. Research suggests that acquisition of language is not strictly sequential and since syllabuses by their very nature introduce linguistic features in linear fashion, no syllabus design can exactly match the acquisition process. In this case it is unimportant which type of syllabus is adopted and which criteria are used in the elaboration of the syllabus. Indeed there is no necessity for a linguistic syllabus as such at all. This does not mean that it is no longer part of the teacher's role to be concerned with the selection of linguistic features for more intensive attention. These features need not, however, be specified in a previously adopted syllabus. Instead, it is proposed that teaching should be based on themes arranged in a thematic syllabus. From a corpus of thematically related language material, the teacher selects linguistic items for pedagogic exploitation. Thus teaching takes place without a language syllabus but with a linguistic focus.

Centre for Applied Language Studies
Department of Linguistic Science
University of Reading

D.A. Wilkins

Notes

1. Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 are taken from Yalden, J.: The Communicative Syllabus: Evolution, Design and Implementation. Oxford. Pergamon Press, 1983.

DISCUSSION

L'exposé présenté par D. Wilkins a suscité de nombreuses remarques de la part des participants au colloque. La discussion, que nous tenterons de synthétiser ici - sans toujours respecter l'ordre des interventions -, concerne différents points abordés dans l'exposé et a parfois amené D. Wilkins à donner certaines précisions. Ainsi par exemple, à propos de l'utilisation de textes en classe, D. Wilkins souligne qu'elle est fondamentale dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères pour plusieurs raisons: Elle a permis de créer, pour l'élève, un contexte linguistique plus varié; elle est motivante car la compréhension (surtout dans la lecture) se développe plus facilement et plus rapidement que la production; enfin, les élèves peuvent travailler les textes et explorer seuls des faits de langue non exploités en classe. Henri Besse est lui aussi favorable à l'utilisation de textes authentiques en classe mais émet toutefois une réserve: si la grammaire de référence du professeur ne correspond pas à la grammaire mise en oeuvre dans le texte authentique, il vaut alors mieux travailler sur des textes semi-fabriqués, textes dans lesquels les deux grammaires peuvent coïncider.

L'utilisation de textes en classe renvoie au problème du choix des thèmes. Jean-François Maire demande si ce choix (et celui d'exploiter certains points centraux dans un texte) n'entre pas parfois en contradiction avec le principe de motivation. Les choix du professeur peuvent ne pas correspondre aux intérêts des élèves. L'intervention du professeur peut donc contrecarrer leur motivation. Christine Kubler considère que si l'on parvient à parler des modalités de l'enseignement (méthode, buts, ...) avec les élèves, ces derniers peuvent donner leur avis et, ainsi, la contradiction entre choix du thème et motivation est

réduite, voire annulée. L'intervention de C. Kubler répond donc à J.-F. Maire mais également à Jean-François de Pietro qui demandait dans quelle mesure il faut parler des modalités de l'enseignement avec les élèves. D. Wilkins, tout comme C. Kubler, ne voit que des avantages dans ces discussions. Andreas Rollinghoff regrette un peu que les linguistes appliqués, après avoir accordé trop d'importance à la grammaire, en accordent maintenant trop au thème. Il lui semble difficile, en tant qu'enseignant, d'expliquer toujours de manière satisfaisante des points grammaticaux dans un texte choisi surtout pour son contenu. Pour D. Wilkins, le choix de thèmes reste primordial et doit être justifié indépendamment des questions de langue. En effet, le but de l'enseignement d'une langue étrangère n'est pas seulement de permettre aux élèves d'utiliser la langue enseignée mais aussi de les ouvrir à une culture nouvelle. C'est donc un objectif éducationnel et culturel - plutôt que purement linguistique - qui doit déterminer le choix des thèmes.

La notion de progression apparaît aussi dans la discussion. Selon H. Besse, D. Wilkins maintient cette notion. Toutefois la progression ne concerne plus l'ordre des leçons mais leur organisation interne à travers l'exploitation systématique de certains points focaux. D. Wilkins admet qu'il y a en effet inévitablement progression dans l'enseignement mais qu'actuellement, il ne paraît plus fondamental de déterminer quel type de progression il faut préconiser. H. Besse mentionne des études récentes sur la progression naturelle, études qui montrent que les programmes d'immersion ne donnent pas les résultats satisfaisants que l'on attendait d'eux. Pour D. Wilkins, ce problème est d'ordre politique et les résultats des études sur

les programmes d'immersion dépendent des attitudes de leurs auteurs. D. Wilkins ne porte pas de jugement de valeur explicite sur ces programmes mais fait remarquer que, au Canada, bon nombre d'anglophones continuent à envoyer leurs enfants dans des écoles à programmes d'immersion. Pour Hans Weber, il serait important que les méthodes d'enseignement lient la progression grammaticale à la motivation des élèves. Ainsi par exemple, on pourrait commencer par enseigner les temps passés plutôt que présents afin de permettre aux étudiants - dès le début - de raconter et de lire des histoires. Wolfgang Bufe revient sur un point abordé dans l'exposé de D. Wilkins: la progression individualisée. Pour W. Bufe, l'individualisation est primordiale dans l'enseignement mais elle implique alors un changement dans les techniques d'évaluation, de contrôle des connaissances. Jusqu'ici, le contrôle s'effectue uniquement en fonction de la progression offerte par le professeur; si l'on veut respecter une progression individualisée, il faudra trouver des moyens différenciés de contrôler les connaissances.

Comme l'ont montré de nombreuses interventions durant le colloque, les modèles linguistiques de description de la langue ne peuvent pas être appliqués de manière directe à l'enseignement. Pour Christine Othenin-Girard, les modèles psycholinguistiques des processus d'acquisition ne peuvent pas non plus être utilisés directement par les enseignants. Puisque ni la linguistique appliquée ni la psycholinguistique ne peuvent venir en aide directement aux praticiens, se pose alors de manière accrue le problème de la formation des enseignants, formation qui, actuellement, ne leur permet pas d'assumer tout ce que l'on attend d'eux.

Université de Neuchâtel
Centre de linguistique appliquée
CH 2000 Neuchâtel

Francine del Coso-Calame