1 Units of Analysis in Syllabus Design — The Case for Task

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General Issues in Course Design

While rarely the case in practice, proposals for language teaching ideally involve theoretically coherent, empirically grounded choices among options in each of six areas: needs identification, syllabus design, methodology design, materials writing, testing, and program evaluation. Saying that the decisions should be theoretically coherent means that they should follow from our current understanding of how the process we are trying to facilitate works — in this case, our theory of how people learn second languages. We are obliged to have recourse to theory when making some decisions for the simple reason that, while a good deal about second language acquisition (SLA) has been discovered empirically, many aspects of what has been observed are incomplete or only partially understood. It would be preferable, of course, to base all the choices on empirical findings as to what works or is most effective in the classroom, but the current state of knowledge does not permit that. Where is one to begin?

As the starting point in planning courses there is much to recommend the choice of unit of analysis for syllabus design. It is arguably the most basic decision for two reasons. First and foremost, the option chosen, whatever it may be, will most clearly reflect the designer’s (often the teacher’s) theory, implicit or explicit (Ramani, 1987), of SLA. Is learning a language a matter of developing skills, learning grammar rules, building neural networks, acquiring tacit linguistic knowledge, forming new habits, becoming a member of a new culture, adding a communicative repertoire, several of these or something else? Whatever course designers or teachers think language learning involves will influence the elements of the target language they present to their students — words, structures, notions, etc. — and how
A variety of syllabus types compete for attention in the 1990s: lexical, structural, notional, functional, situational, topical, procedural, process, content-based and task, plus various multistrand combinations thereof (see McKay, 1980). It is important to note that the issue is not which particular syllabus to adopt, but which type and that this in turn is a question of the appropriate unit of analysis in syllabus design. Thus, selecting, for example, a structural syllabus, still leaves open various options as to how any particular structural syllabus will look — most obviously with regard to which structures will be selected for inclusion, how they will be graded, or sequenced, how they will be organized, e.g. whether structures will be recycled (so-called ‘spiral’ syllabuses) or presented once only in strict linear fashion by students working in small groups, but would preclude classroom procedures which assume structural grading, such as most of those employed by the Audio-lingual Method, Total Physical Response, and Silent Way.

Second Language Syllabus Types

A useful distinction to bear in mind in discussions of syllabus types is that between two superordinate categories, analytic and synthetic syllabuses (Wilkins, 1974, 1976). In analytic syllabuses, the

prior analysis of the total language system into a set of discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of a synthetic approach is largely superfluous... Analytic approaches...
are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes. (Wilkins, 1976: 13)

‘Analytic’, that is, refers not to what the syllabus designer does, but to the operations required of the learner. Wilkins goes on to say:

since we are inviting the learner, directly or indirectly, to recognize the linguistic components of the language behaviour he is acquiring, we are in effect basing our approach on the learner’s analytic capabilities. (Wilkins, 1976: 14)

Updating Wilkins’ definition a little, analytic syllabuses are those that present the target language whole chunks at a time, in molar rather than molecular units, without linguistic interference or control. They rely on (a) the learners’ presumed ability to perceive regularities in the input and induce rules, and/or (b) the continued availability to learners of innate knowledge of linguistic universals and the ways language can vary, knowledge which can be reactivated by exposure to natural samples of the L2. Procedural, process and task syllabuses are examples of the analytic syllabus type.²

In a synthetic language teaching ‘strategy’:

different parts of language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up... At any one time the learner is being exposed to a deliberately limited sample of language. (Wilkins, 1976: 2)

Again, ‘synthetic’ refers to the learner’s role:

The learner’s task is to re-synthesize the language that has been broken down into a large number of small pieces with the aim of making this learning task easier. (Wilkins, 1976: 2)
Synthetic syllabuses segment the target language into discrete linguistic items, for presentation one at a time. They rely on learners' (assumed) ability to learn a language in parts (e.g. structures and functions) independently of one another, and also to integrate, or synthesize, the pieces when the time comes to use them for communicative purposes. Structural, lexical, notional, functional, and most situational and topical syllabuses are synthetic.

Wilkins argued convincingly for the conceptual distinction. He made it clear, however, that for practical purposes, he really saw analytic and synthetic syllabus types not as a dichotomy, but as the end-points on a continuum:

... these approaches are not mutually exclusive ... Any actual course or syllabus could be placed somewhere on the continuum between the wholly synthetic and the wholly analytic, but the actual decision procedures that have been followed in the process of selection will show that it tends towards one pole or the other. (Wilkins, 1976: 1-2)

A second, related, distinction is that between Type A and Type B syllabuses (White, 1988: 44-5). Type A syllabuses have the following characteristics. They focus on what is to be learned, the L2. They are interventionist. Someone preselects and predigests the language to be taught, dividing it up into small pieces, and determining learning objectives in advance of any consideration of who the learners may be. Type A syllabuses, therefore, White points out, are external to the learner, other-directed, determined by authority, set the teacher as decision-maker, treat the subject matter of instruction as important, assess success and failure in terms of achievement or mastery, and generally ‘do things to the learner.'

Type B syllabuses, on the other hand, focus on how the language is to be learned. They are non-interventionist. They involve no artificial pre-selection or arrangement of items and allow objectives to be determined by a process of negotiation between teacher and learners after they meet, as a course evolves. They are internal to the learner, negotiated between learners and teacher as joint decision-makers, emphasize the process of learning rather than the subject matter, assess accomplishment in relationship to learners' criteria for success, and ‘do things for or with the learner'. As will become clear, there is a close, but not complete, match between synthetic and analytic syllabus, on the one hand, and Type A and Type B syllabuses, on the other.

Units of Analysis in Synthetic Syllabuses

Structure

The standard works of Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens (1964) and Mackey (1965) describe what has become the orthodox approach to syllabus design concerning selection and grading in structural syllabuses. The structural syllabus consists of a series of isolated linguistic forms, or morphosyntactic 'structures', like equational sentences, yes/no and wh-questions, articles, prepositions, conditionals, and relative clauses, plus inductively or deductively presented pedagogic 'grammar points', such as when to use an infinitive or a gerund. The structures are generally presented one at a time, but occasionally in contrasting pairs, e.g. singular and plural forms of nouns, or simple present and present progressive. While structural linguistics has changed considerably over the past thirty years, the content of structural syllabuses still generally reflects the preoccupation of linguists, especially contrastivists of the 1950s and 1960s and other 'traditional, descriptive' grammarians in the 1970s and 1980s, with surface structure differences between languages. Modern generative grammar (Chomsky's universal grammar, Bresnan's Lexical Functional Grammar, Foley's lexical unification grammar, etc.) and functional-typological grammar (e.g. Givon, 1984) have as yet, at least, had little impact.

Structural syllabuses are synthetic and Type A. They are still by far the most widely used, especially in foreign language settings. Indeed, arguments in their favor remain mostly logistical. Structural syllabuses and materials, it is pointed out, are widespread and relatively easy to use, even for untrained teachers with little command of English. Change, it is claimed, would threaten such teachers and learners (not to mention textbook sales). And then there is educational gatekeeping:

Let us now turn to a very practical argument in favor of teaching grammar, namely that many ESL/EFL students are required to pass a standardized national or international exam in order to proceed with their plans ... Typically, a major component of such exams is grammar. Therefore, to give these students an incomplete grounding in grammar, regardless of one's conviction about teaching it, is to do them a great disservice. Students have to know and apply the rules of English grammar in order to do well on such tests. (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988: 4, emphasis added)

Pervasive and easy to use though they may be, structural syllabuses have been criticized on several grounds. First, many have commented on the inevitable unnaturalness of structurally and lexically graded dialogs or
reading passages (see, for example, Crystal, 1981; Ventola, 1987; Widdowson, 1968). Textbook characters may hold entire conversations in which all verbs are marked for the same tense and aspect, but native speakers rarely do. Second, there is a tendency to model usage, not use (Widdowson, 1971), which arises from attempts at narrow contextualization of the 'structure of the day'. This can affect teachers as well as textbook writers. A lesson on the 'present progressive', for example, may lead to model sentences native speakers would never use, such as 'I am writing on the board', said by the teacher while performing the action in full view of the class, rather than potentially authentic utterances such as 'Police are holding the man on a charge of assault', used by a radio news reporter. A third problem is the misleading mixing of different functions of language which happen to be encoded using the same form. Widdowson (1971) notes, for example, that one may associate the imperative mood with the act of commanding, but that this is far from the whole story:

'Bake the pie in a slow oven', 'Come for dinner tomorrow', 'Take up his offer', 'Forgive us our trespasses'. An instruction, an invitation, advice and prayer are all different acts, yet the imperative serves them all: — and need serve none of them: 'You must bake the pie in a slow oven', 'Why don't you come to dinner tomorrow?', 'I should take up his offer', 'We pray forgiveness of our trespasses'. Just as one linguistic form may fulfill a variety of rhetorical functions, so one rhetorical function may be fulfilled by a variety of linguistic forms. (Widdowson, 1971: 38-9)

In addition, Wilkins (1972), among others, has drawn attention both to the negative effects on motivation for those learners who need to be able to communicate as soon as possible, and also (whether perceived as demotivating or not) the inefficiency inherent in the idea that the whole grammatical system has to be taught when few learners need it all.

Rarely mentioned but, we would argue, most serious of all, are the limitations of non-psychologically based descriptions of linguistic competence to the psychological process of SL acquisition. Full native-like syntactic constructions, for example, are unlearnable by beginners (see Cook, 1971). With no evidence and little discussion, the utility of such structures as acquisition units is typically either asserted or assumed. Yet twenty years of research on interlanguage development in and out of classrooms has shown that learners neither acquire one structure (or word, notion or function) at a time in linear, additive fashion, nor do they move from zero to native-like mastery of those items in one step, whether or not they receive error correction. Instead, they pass through apparently fixed developmental sequences in word order, negation, questions, relative clauses and so on, sequences which have to include often quite lengthy stages of non-target-like use of forms (as well as use of non-target forms), and which seem to be impervious to instruction. Successive stages in such sequences rarely involve single-step, non-target to full target switches, as shown, for example, by the gradual modifications marking transition through the well established four-step sequence for the acquisition of English negation by Spanish speakers (for review, see Schumann, 1979):

(1) pre-verbal (No happy. No you do that)
(2) internal preverbal, unanalysed (He not here. She no/don't have job)
(3) attachment to modal auxiliaries (I can't/mustn't go)
(4) analysed target (I don't/He doesn't/She didn't like it)

and by the frequently observed temporary 'deterioration' in learner performance (so-called 'backsliding'), which sometimes gives rise to U-shaped developmental curves (see Bowerman, 1982; Huebner, 1983; Kellerman, 1985; McLaughlin, 1988; Meisel, Clahsen & Pienemann, 1981).

Furthermore, learners do not acquire structures in isolation but as parts of complex mappings of form–function relationships. Many structures could not in principle be acquired separately, either, since they share a symbiotic relationship with others. ESL negation is intrinsically related to auxiliary development, interrogatives to word order rules, and so on. (For reviews of numerous studies supporting these generalizations, see, for example, Hatch, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991.) Finally, for beginners, at least, the inadequacy of full native-like target language structure as a unit of analysis in syllabus design is further demonstrated by the consistent findings that acquisition sequences do not reflect instructional sequences (see, for example, Lightbown, 1983; Pienemann, 1987) and that while a focus on form can facilitate learning in several ways, e.g. by speeding it up (for review, see Long, 1988), it can do so only when the items chosen are appropriate to the learner's current developmental stage (Pienemann, 1984; Pienemann & Johnston, 1987). These criticisms, it should be noted, apply to synthetic syllabuses in general, not just to those employing structure as their unit of analysis.

Notion and function

The most popular alternative to have emerged to the structural syllabus is the notional (in practice, usually notional–functional) syllabus (Wilkins, 1972, 1976; compare Candlin, 1976). The notional–functional syllabus is also synthetic and Type A, but presents the target language not as isolated linguistic forms per se, but as groups of the linguistic devices needed to
encode three kinds of semantic categories: (a) semantico-grammatical, such as time (past, present and future), place, distance, sequence, and duration; (b) modality, such as necessity, possibility, probability, and certainty; and (c) communicative function, such as offering, requesting, accusing, denying, and defining. Thus, whereas English imperatives and the modal would might appear far apart and unrelated in a structural syllabus, they might be grouped together in a unit of notional–functional materials, e.g. on ‘Offering’ (‘Have another sandwich’, ‘Would you like another coffee?’), along with work on certain lexical items and fixed phrases (try, how about, help yourself to) and intonation contours frequently associated with offers.

A grammatical syllabus is one which accords highest priority to grammatical criteria and sees the structure of language teaching as being principally provided by an ordered sequence of grammatical categories (‘structures’) . . . a notional syllabus would seek to change the balance of priorities by placing emphasis on the meanings expressed or the functions performed through language. (Wilkins, 1981: 83)

Notional–functional syllabuses are an improvement over structural ones in that materials based on them can come closer to modeling authentic target language use and can make salient the purposes to which linguistic forms are put, or their ‘communicative value’ (Widdowson, 1978: 11). They can also be related more visibly to students’ current or future language needs, with resulting motivational benefits, although this is a function of the needs identification often conducted in preparations for notional–functional courses, not an intrinsic property of such syllabuses. Beyond this, they offer few obvious improvements, and have several flaws.

Wilkins’ initial proposals have been criticized on a variety of grounds. It has been pointed out that preparation of notional syllabuses, like structural syllabuses, involves fragmenting the target language, presenting one notion or function at a time, and assuming that learners can eventually synthesize the whole, whereas functions actually co-occur in discourse, and take on communicative value from that discourse context (Crombie, 1985; Widdowson, 1978). There are also very practical problems for anyone attempting to produce a notional–functional syllabus. The set of functions is non-finite, many individual notions and functions are difficult to define or distinguish, and their linguistic exponents are often laborious to establish other than via (differing) native speaker intuitions.

It is also alleged that the notional–functional syllabus lacks a sound psychological basis. Brumfit (1981: 91–2) states that ‘principles of organization must be answerable to a view of how language is learnt’, but observes that Wilkins does not address himself to learning theory. Brumfit continues:

until we have some way of saying ‘X is a notion and Y is not, and we can test them in the following ways’, we are talking about a vacuous concept.  

Wilkins’ work has also been criticized for paying no attention to a theory of language acquisition and for being based purely on reasoning, not on empirical evidence (Paulston, 1981). It is certainly the case that no consideration was given to the psychological reality of notions and functions until more than a decade after their introduction (Cook, 1985).

Studies of interlanguage development provide no more support for the idea that learners acquire a language one notion or function at a time than for the idea that they do so one word or structure at a time. As Prabhu has pointed out:

The point is moot, however, since it is the linguistic exponents of notions and functions — that is, structures, lexical items, intonation patterns, and so on — that the learner actually encounters in the input, not the notions or functions themselves. The sequencing of those items may differ from that in a structural syllabus, due to forms now being grouped according to communicative function rather than linguistic relationships or (supposed) learning difficulty. The linguistic input to and output demands on the learner, however, still typically consist of isolated native-like structures — structures which are no more plausible as instantly acquirable items for having their communicative function made more salient. In addition, reviews (e.g. Long, 1978) of commercially published notional–functional textbooks show that the exercise types, formats, and items they contain are frequently indistinguishable from those in structurally based books (a quality by no means unique to notional–functional materials), and that their model dialogs are still far from realistic samples of the ways native speakers talk (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Cathcart, 1989; Pearson, 1983; Swain, 1985; Ventola, 1987; Williams, 1988).

The initial uncritical acceptance of notional–functional syllabuses was subsequently modified (Wilkins, 1974, 1981). Syllabuses, it was claimed, could range from being principally grammatical to fully notional, according to learners’ needs. The role of ‘an extensive mastery of the grammatical
system' was reaffirmed as essential to anything more than 'a rudimentary communicative ability' (Wilkins, 1981: 85).

There is nothing new in the idea that the grammar of a language can somehow be learned, and that then communication becomes possible — nor any evidence that it is correct. As an implicit theory about how language is learned, it certainly provides a striking contrast with the claims of several first and second language acquisition researchers that grammar develops out of conversation or other language use (see, for example, Atkinson, 1979; Ervin-Tripp, 1978; Hatch, 1978; Keenan, 1974; Scollon, 1973; and for critical discussion, Sato, 1986). Nevertheless, White (1988: 78-81) notes that, perhaps as a reaction to the loss of confidence in pure notional syllabuses, hybrid structural/notional-functional syllabuses and materials have become more common in recent years, with several proposals offered for interweaving functional and structural elements (see, for example, Brumfit, 1984a; McKay, 1980; Stern, 1983; Ullman, 1982; Yalden, 1983). We would simply note that the prospects of two unmotivated units combining to produce one motivated hybrid would seem rather dim.

Situation and topic

Less well known and less widely used than structural or notional-functional varieties, two further synthetic syllabus types are those which adopt situation and topic as their unit of analysis. While one might expect that choice of these units would mean language is presented to learners in terms of where it is used and what it is used to talk, read or write about, respectively, the real picture turns out to be a little more complicated. The term ‘situational’ has two possible meanings in SL syllabus design. The first, as in ‘structural-situational’, implies that a situational syllabus is really another variant of the basic structural kind described above. Examples of this kind of course identified by Howatt (1984: 225) are the audiovisual courses of CREDIF [1961] such as Voix et Images de France [and] a simpler adaptation popularized by L. G. Alexander in his widely used elementary course First Things First [1967]

and another notable example was the Australian government’s so-called Situational English course (Commonwealth Office of Education, 1967; see Yalden (1983) for more details of this syllabus type). Alexander (1967: xiii) actually refers to this form of ‘situational’ teaching as structurally controlled situational teaching: teaching a language by means of a series of everyday situations, while at the same time grading the structures which are presented.

The second use of ‘situational’ implies courses which are organized ‘around situations and deal with structures as they arise’ (Mohan, 1977: 251). Everyday use of the term might lead one to expect units on situations like ‘At the supermarket’, ‘In immigration and customs’, ‘On vacation’, or ‘At the party’, and such items do sometimes occur in so-called situational materials. On the basis of an analysis of representative situational course books, however, Mohan concluded that situational course content ... does not consist of situations per se, but rather it consists of topics, which are illustrated by situations which show how an interaction in that topic area might develop. (Mohan, 1977: 251)

For Mohan, an example of a topic is ‘shopping’, under which more than one ‘situation’, e.g. ‘shopping for food, shopping for clothes’ (1977: 251) can be grouped. It is not necessarily the case that topically organized materials imply the use of situations: English Topics (Cook, 1974, 1978) is a collection of independent units of stimulus material and discussion questions arranged in terms of topics of general interest, intended to be used to produce classroom discussion of the topics and language which is incidental to communication and interaction in the second language. Although this kind of syllabus seems to be less popular now, there are one or two other ESL texts which are...
primarily topical, for example, (the somewhat confusingly titled) *Notions in English* (Jones, 1979) and *Notion by Notion* (Ferreira, 1981). Jones's text consists of a sequence of units, each of which provides the intermediate or advanced learner with material and related exercises to talk about a series of topics. Examples include the weather, shops, drinks, entertainment, money and geography. A strong synthetic undercurrent is apparent in the sub-titles to many topics, which list structural or functional items dealt with, as well as in the inclusion of overtly linguistic issues as the 'topics' (or 'notions') in several units, e.g. 'questions', 'the past', 'articles', 'isn't it?', 'word + preposition', and 'preposition + noun'. Situational aspects are purely incidental.

In general, it appears that a 'situational' syllabus often really means a 'structural–situation' syllabus, in which case it will be open to all the criticisms of structural syllabuses made earlier. True situational syllabuses and accompanying materials have been produced, however, and if often blurred in practice, situation and topic can in principle also be differentiated. Situational syllabuses have the potential advantage of tapping students' knowledge of the world as an aid to learning, and also of providing realistic, and hence motivating, materials. Topical syllabuses share this motivational potential, especially if selection is based on a needs identification performed in terms of topics or on the findings of research on frequency of topics in the conversations of people of the same age as the learner. Why, then, have they not become more widely used (at least, as indicated by the absence of published materials of this type)?

Two immediate, related difficulties when designing such syllabuses lie in defining and distinguishing situations and topics, on the one hand, and in the broadness of the concepts, with resulting lack of precision for materials design, on the other. How many separate 'situations' or 'sub-situations', for example, is a passenger involved in 'At the railway station'? Just one trip through a busy urban station in some societies might easily involve a traveller asking the way (to the ticket office, platform, restroom or snack bar), buying things (a ticket, a newspaper, a meal), decoding station announcements, reading timetables and train departure boards, dealing with porters, ticket inspectors and other passengers, and much more. Unless such additional factors as the interlocutors (ticket clerk, porter, newspaper vendor, cashier) and/or the 'immediate situation' (ticket window, newspaper kiosk, snack bar cash register, platform entrance) are also specified, it is in fact largely impossible to predict language from situation, as was elegantly argued nearly thirty years ago in a little known but important article by McIntosh (1965).

Even when more narrowly defined in these ways, however, the topics of conversations that transpire in such 'immediate situations', the notions and functions realized, and the lexical items and grammatical structures used to encode them are all still rather unpredictable. This is easily illustrated with excerpts from transcripts of approximately thirty minutes of conversations at the ticket window (a narrowly defined situation) of a small rural railroad station in Pennsylvania recorded surreptitiously several years ago by the first author in preparation for a course on English for specific purposes. The excerpts in Figure 1 were typical.

As can be seen from the samples, by no means all that transpired, even in this 'narrow situation', concerned either trains or the purchase of tickets, and when tickets were involved, terms like one-way, bargain, tripper and senior were preferred to the less informative ticket. Perhaps coincidentally, one of the few to use ticket, passenger D, was a non-native speaker. Most exchanges involved sales of other items (candy, newspapers, cigarettes, etc.) also handled by the clerk, and/or personal matters (the fate of a lost dog the previous day, an illegally parked car, and so on). The propriety of these items was no doubt partly determined by the small size of the station, the suburban location, the familiarity of the interlocutors (ticket clerk and, for the most part, regular commuters), and other factors. The kinds of constructions modeled for passengers in situational language teaching materials for such occasions, however—'How much is a ticket to Liverpool?', 'Which platform does the train to London leave from?' or 'I'd like a window seat, please' (see Cross, 1980)—would be just as atypical and inappropriate at the front of the line at a ticket window in a busy urban terminus, and during rush hour, at least in some countries, considerably more likely to elicit abuse (or worse) from fellow passengers and ticket clerk alike.

A further problem with situational (indeed, all) syllabuses, is grading. There is in principle no way to grade situations in terms of difficulty or as to which ones need to be 'learned' before others, as should be obvious from the previous discussion of the more fundamental problem of specifying situations themselves or the language that occurs in them. (See Bell (1981a) for further discussion.) Commenting on this issue, McKay (1980) observes that some [situational] syllabuses (e.g. Georgetown University A.L.I., 1968) are ordered on the basis that the learner will encounter the situations (e.g. a text for foreign students might proceed as follows; landing at the airport, finding a place to live, registering at the university, etc.). Other situational texts rely on the structural complexity of the dialogues for the sequencing of the material. (McKay, 1980: 76)

McKay cites *Let's Talk* (Finocchiaro, 1970) as an example of the latter (structural) approach to grading (situations).
A.
How you doin’?
Tripper?
(2) That’s Bethayres to Logan?
(8) (XXX)
[stamps ticket] (5)
OK Eleven she be and Thank you
B.
Morning Yes (mam)
OK That’ll be one-twenty
[giving change] That’ll be two
OK
Yes There’s an eight fifty-two due next Then comes the nine o one
C.
Yeah I had to finally send him away (He) was here until eleven o’clock (and) no body claimed him so (2) OK
Right
Mmhm
Alright and yourself?
Right
Mmhm
Right
Morning Senior citizen one way Terminal (By the way)
[gives money]
(Thank you)
(5) [returning to counter] Is there a train expected before the nine o one?
Thank you
I need a couple of bargains Did you get rid of the doggie?
Really?
[holding up cigarettes and and candy] Three seventy and twenty-five right
Oh
Right
Mmhm

D.
No not yet
Nine o one train’s passed yet?
Not yet? Ah (xx)
Ok what would you like?
(6) Five bargain ticket [sic] please
[stamps ticket] That’ll be nine twenty-(seven)
[gives money]
That’ll be ten Thank you
(Is it) OK that my blue car is parked (in front of here)? (2)
In front (1) In the uh (xx)
Here is the Volkswagen?
Red Volkswagen?
Yeah well that’s-
handicapped people (there xx)
Well I don’t know That’s for
handicapped

In sum, to take situation as the unit of analysis in a synthetic syllabus is problematic because most situations are too ill-defined and too broad to be used in identifying learner needs, designing materials or testing. Where you use language, it also turns out, is less relevant for language learning than what you use it for, i.e. task. While not without problems itself, task comes closer to providing a basis for all those aspects of course design, as we shall see.

Many of the criticisms of situational syllabuses apply to topical syllabuses, too. Topic is also a broad, difficult to define, semantic construct (for discussion, see Brown & Yule, 1983; Siros & Dorval, 1988), and like situations, topics have an unfortunate tendency to merge into one another (Goodenough & Weiner, 1978; Jefferson, 1978) and subsume other topics (van Oosten, 1984).

A further drawback is that, like situation, topic is of limited use for predicting grammatical form, although it does slightly better with vocabulary. A discussion of a particular TESOL Convention could well involve a variety of genres such as explanations, opinions, narratives, reports and so on,
which in turn require a vast range of lexis and linguistic constructions to be encoded. Even an apparently ‘narrower’ topic, like ‘next Sunday's American football game’, might easily involve the specialized jargon of rules, equipment and strategies for playing the game, famous games, clubs and players, last Sunday’s game, another upcoming game, a commentary on a game, old knee injuries, the money involved, the NFL players’ union, drug abuse, racial discrimination, and so on. As with situations, there is also no obvious way to grade or sequence topics, given the impossibility of distinguishing their boundaries or predicting what they involve.

Word

Among the earliest efforts to provide SL teaching with some empirical support are the various vocabulary selection studies, which were influential in the 1920s and 1930s (Faucett, West, Palmer & Thordike, 1936; Ogden, 1930; West, 1926). Initiated in Prussia for the training of stenographers, vocabulary frequency studies were seen as an obvious way of ensuring that students learned the most ‘important’ words first. The manifestations of these projects varied. Ogden’s Basic English was intended as an auxiliary language and will be remembered for contributing ‘doublethink’ to the language (via George Orwell). The joint work of British and American specialists (Faucett et al., 1936) became known as the Carnegie List, and was utilized in a major text whose popularity lasted until the 1960s: Essential English (Eckersley, 1938–42). (For further details, see Widdowson, 1968; Howatt, 1984.)

Recent advances in techniques for the computer analysis of large data bases of authentic text have helped resuscitate this line of work. The modern lexical syllabus is discussed in Sinclair & Renouf (1988), and related work on collocation is reported by Sinclair (1987) and Kennedy (1989). The Collins COBUILD English Course (Willis & Willis, 1988) is cited as an exemplary pedagogic implementation of the work. In fact, however, the COBUILD textbooks utilize one of the more complex hybrid syllabuses in current ESL texts. Seven strands refer to: (1) tasks and topics, (2) texts and features, (3) writing, (4) social language, (5) verbs/tenses and clause patterns, (6) noun phrases, pronouns, adjectives, prepositions and adverbial phrases, and (7) spoken and written discourse. The objectives for each unit are grouped under three categories: (a) lexical, (b) grammar and discourse, and (c) tasks. Many tasks, however, look like ‘macro’ functions, e.g. (in Book 1), talking about families, describing things, expressing likes and dislikes, discussing and comparing buildings, and explaining answers.

In their introduction to the Teacher’s Book, Willis & Willis (1988, ii–vi) are refreshingly open and explicit about what they are attempting to achieve. The methodology for the Course, the reader is informed, adheres to five basic principles:

1. People learn a language most effectively by using the language to do things — to find out information, to solve problems, to talk about personal experiences, and so on.
2. A focus on accuracy is vital.
3. As far as possible learners should be exposed to real language.
4. Grammar is learned rather than taught. Coursebooks and teachers provide useful guidelines on the language, but learners should additionally be encouraged to think and deduce for themselves.
5. Learners need strategies for organising what they have learned — they need rules, patterns and categories.

The Collins COBUILD English Course realises these well-established principles through a new language syllabus — a lexical syllabus . . . (Willis & Willis, 1988, ii)

The sense of a potential conflict between some of these principles, e.g. 1, 3 and 4, on the one hand, and 2 and 5, on the other, is strengthened by the information (p. iii) that the ‘syllabus for Level One consists of 700 of the commonest words in today’s English’, for it would seem unlikely that ‘real language’ will happen to be lexically graded in this way. Similarly, a two-stage classroom procedure the authors describe for student work on pedagogic tasks, although obviously carefully thought out, assumes that students can simultaneously work towards task accomplishment and target-like performance of the code. Problem-solving tasks of various kinds are first to be done in small groups, where the ‘focus is not on the language itself, but on the performing of the task in order to reach the desired outcome’ (p. iii). The task, however, ‘is not the final goal of the teaching cycle’ (p. iii). A public report to the whole class is to follow, and because it is public and potential input for other learners, ‘it is appropriate that the report should be accurate as well as fluent’ (p. iii). Finally, in addition to student study of texts to find particular language features, there is controlled practice:

Controlled repetition of various kinds involves students in the practising of useful and very frequent combinations of words in English, in order sounds and intonation patterns accurately and spontaneously. (Willis & Willis, 1988: iv)

The COBUILD Course offers what appear to be some of the most ‘authentic’ texts and dialogs in commercially published language teaching
materials. The exercises and pedagogic tasks are attractively presented, stimulating, and carefully planned, and the whole package looks user-friendly. We are not persuaded, however, that these accomplishments (assuming our assessments are accurate) have anything to do with the Course (supposedly) being based on a lexical syllabus, as opposed to the ingenuity of the authors (Willis & Willis), the insights of the COBUILD project’s leader (Sinclair), and the extensive field testing that preceded the materials’ publication.

According to Sinclair & Renouf (1988), the main benefit of a lexical syllabus is that it emphasizes utility — the student learns that which is most valuable because it is most frequent. This is part of the rationale for any needs analysis (see West, 1926), however, so one may ask whether identifying needs in terms of lexical frequency provides any special benefit. Sinclair & Renouf claim that working from the lexical end of language selection acts as a shortcut to the correct selection of other linguistic material. Holding that modern SL syllabuses ignore content, and that notional/functional syllabuses, for example, are ‘incomplete’, they remark that

if the analysis of the words and phrases has been done correctly then all the relevant grammar, etc. [i.e. structures, notions, and functions] should appear in a proper proportion. (Sinclair & Renouf, 1988: 155)

This interesting claim is unfortunately not supported with any evidence. In addition, it is asserted that the lexical syllabus is ‘neutral’ with regard to ‘the use of tasks to practice effective communication’, since it is ‘an independent syllabus, unrelated by any principles to any methodology’ (p. 155), and that indeed, all syllabuses should be independent of methodology (p. 145). It is, therefore, subject to the same criticism leveled by Brumfit against notional/functional syllabuses, that it (in this case, deliberately) takes no cognizance of how a second language is learned. (For further discussion see Long & Crookes, 1992.) It is in addition threatened by other general problems of synthetic syllabuses, to which we now turn.

Generic problems with synthetic syllabuses

Whatever the unit of analysis — structure, notion, function, situation, topic or word — synthetic syllabuses share a static, target language, product orientation. Syllabus content is ultimately based on an analysis of the language to be learned, whether this be overt, as in the case of structure, word, notion, and function, or covert, as has usually been the case with situation and topic. Further, the analysis is conducted on an idealized native speaker version of that language. It is assumed that the unit, or teaching point, which is presented will be what is learned, and that it is efficient to organize and present material in an isolating fashion. SLA research offers no evidence to suggest that any of these synthetic units are meaningful acquisition units, that they are (or even can be) acquired separately, singly, in linear fashion, or that they can be learned prior to and separate from language use. In fact, the same literature provides overwhelming evidence against all those tacit assumptions.

SLA is sufficiently difficult that most learners’ attempts end in at least partial failure. Whatever the relative merits of one unit compared to another, therefore, the psychological processes involved in learning would seem to have priority over arguments concerning alternative ways of analyzing the ideal, but rarely attained, product. While it also involves the acquisition of social and cultural knowledge, language learning is a psycholinguistic process, not a linguistic one, yet synthetic syllabuses consistently leave the learner out of the equation.

## Units of Analysis in Analytic Syllabuses

### Early proposals

Whereas synthetic syllabuses are concerned mostly with the language to be taught, alternatives accord as much or more attention to learners and language learning. Both analytic and Type B syllabuses are based on the view that language (like other cognitive skills, see Crookes, 1991; Levelt, 1978; Welford, 1968) is something that may be acquired by analysis, rather than through a process of accretion. The position goes back at least 300 years (see Howatt, 1984), but was more recently articulated by Newmark (1966: 77): ‘if the task of learning to speak English were additive and linear . . . it is difficult to see how anyone could learn [it] . . .’ Newmark maintained that ‘language is learned a whole act at a time, rather than as an assemblage of constituent skills’. He conceived of a language course of an ‘analytic’ type, where large ‘chunks’ of language were presented and learned, the presentation possibly on videotape, the learning through observation, and practice through extensive use of roleplay (see Candlin, 1972). Newmark & Reibel (1968) and Reibel (1969) argued for the irrelevance to what was known about language learning of traditional approaches to sequencing. They claimed that even if done correctly, the result could be only a series of texts whose linguistic properties might collectively reflect real language use (in which case, why not use authentic texts?), but any one of which would be a distorted sample and, hence, a potential hindrance to learning.

Early proposals concerning analytic, Type B, syllabuses (Macnamara, 1973; Newmark, 1964, 1966; Newmark & Reibel, 1968; Reibel, 1969) had little institutional backing and no accompanying teaching materials distributed.
by large commercial publishers, both factors which inhibit the spread of ideas in language teaching, good or bad (Richards, 1984a). Not surprisingly, therefore, classroom implementation was initially small scale and the result of individual effort and imagination (Allwright, 1976; Dakin, 1973; Newmark, 1971). One somewhat larger institutionalized project was reported, however, in connection with development of the Malaysian Language Syllabus (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1975).

The Malaysian case obviously antedates most of the theoretical work discussed so far. Original implementation was influenced by the British 'communicative approach' to language teaching and specifically the early 1970s (L1) materials development work of Sinclair (discussed in Howatt, 1984: 279–80). Throughout the materials related to this program, the term 'activity' is used, and we consider it under the general heading of 'analytic'.

Following governmental specification in 1975 of three simple program goals, 24 general objectives were listed by program developers, and the political, business and educational establishments were asked to add to, delete from or otherwise modify the list. The revised version was taken to constitute a needs analysis (Richards, 1984b), and used as the basis for constructing English language 'products'. (For further details, see Rodgers, 1984; Samah, 1984.) An example of an objective was to 'follow and understand a talk on specific topics', and an example of a 'classroom procedure': 'A foreign visitor has expressed interest in a poster showing local tourist attractions. Describe the attractions shown on the poster' (Malaysian English Language Syllabus, 1975, cited in Richards, 1984b: 36). No systematic evaluation of the program was ever carried out, and for reasons which appear to have been largely institutional, use of the syllabus was discontinued (Etherton, 1979; Rodgers, 1979).

It is only recently that some more substantial attempts to use analytic syllabuses have appeared. While situation and topic could in principle be used as units of analysis in that work, this has not happened. Most attempts to date have chosen task as the unit of analysis. Definitions of task have varied, however, and three very different kinds of task-based syllabuses have emerged: procedural, process, and task. Reflecting their (predominantly) Type B, as opposed simply to analytic, orientation, all three proposals devote explicit attention to the learning or language learning process and how best to facilitate it, and each goes at least some way towards offering an integrated approach to program design, not just syllabus design.

Task and Three Types of Task-based Syllabus

Procedural syllabuses

The procedural syllabus is associated with the work of Prabhu, Ramani and others (then) at the Regional Institute of English in Bangalore, India. The Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1980, 1984, 1987) was implemented in eight classrooms with some 18 teachers and 390 children aged 8 to 15, for periods of one to three years, from 1979 to 1984. Early influences were similar to those of the Malaysian communicative syllabuses, but were quickly abandoned:

Communicative teaching in most Western thinking has been training for communication, which I claim involves one in some way or other in preselection; it is a kind of matching of notion and form. Whereas the Bangalore Project is teaching through communication; and therefore the very notion of communication is different. (Prabhu, 1980: 164)

Prabhu disagrees with several aspects of Monitor Theory (as in Krashen, 1982), including the idea that comprehensible input is an adequate methodological construct. However, he supports the idea that students need plenty of opportunity to develop their comprehension abilities before any production is demanded of them, he recognizes that acquisition of a linguistic structure is not 'an instant, one-step procedure', and he claims (Prabhu, 1984, 1987) with Krashen that language form is acquired subconsciously through 'the operation of some internal system of abstract rules and principles' when the learner's attention is focused on meaning, i.e. task-completion, not language (Prabhu, 1987: 70). This view of the learning process shows that a procedural syllabus is clearly of an analytic nature:

any attempt to guide that process more directly (and whether or not explicitly) is rejected as being unprofitable and probably harmful. There is therefore no syllabus in terms of vocabulary or structure, no preselection of language items for any given lesson or activity and now stage in the lesson when language items are practised or sentence production as such is demanded. The basis of each lesson is a problem or a task... (Prabhu, 1984: 275–6)

Prabhu's definition of 'task' for the purposes of the Bangalore project was fairly abstract, and oriented towards cognition, process and (teacher-fronted) pedagogy:

An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a 'task'. (Prabhu, 1987: 24)
In practice, two related tasks or two versions of the same task were typically paired. The first, or ‘pre-task’, was used by the teacher in a whole-class format, perhaps with one or more pupils. Its purpose was to present and demonstrate the task, to assess its difficulty for the class (if necessary, to modify it accordingly), and perhaps most crucial of all, for what Prabhu (1984: 276) describes vaguely as ‘to let the language relevant to it come into play’. The second, the task proper, was for the pupils to work on, usually individually. There followed feedback from the teacher on task accomplishment.

Tasks in a procedural syllabus should be intellectually challenging enough to maintain students’ interest, for that is what will sustain learners’ efforts at task completion, focus them on meaning and, as part of that process, engage them in confronting the task’s linguistic demands (Prabhu, 1987: 55–7). Opinion-gap, and later, information-gap and (especially) reasoning-gap activities were favored in the Bangalore project (for discussion, see Prabhu, 1987: 46–53). It is important that learners perceive a task as presenting a ‘reasonable challenge’, i.e. as difficult, but feasible. Difficulty is initially a matter of trial and error, and ‘a rough measure of reasonable challenge for us is that at least half the class should be successful with at least half the task’ (Prabhu, 1984: 277).

Prabhu (1987: 138–43) provides a list of the ‘task types’ (how tasks were classified is far from obvious) that pupils worked on in the Bangalore project, of which the following are representative:

Tabular information: Interpreting information presented in tables e.g. about books (columns for title, author, publisher, price, year of publication); applicants for a job (columns for age, qualifications, past employment); also schools, hotels, etc.

Distances: Working out the distances between places, from given distances between other places or from the scale of a map, comparing distances and deciding on desirable routes of travel in given situations, constructing maps from distances and directions inferred from given descriptions.

Stories and dialogues: Listening to stories (of a ‘whodunit’ kind) and completing them with appropriate solutions, reading stories or dialogues and answering comprehension questions (particularly of an inferential kind) on them . . . identifying factual inconsistencies in given narrative or descriptive accounts. (Prabhu, 1987: 46–7)

As these examples suggest, Bangalore tasks were mostly of the kind familiar in the many variants of so-called ‘communicative language teaching’ (CLT) which emerged in Europe in the 1970s. CLT is not ‘task-based’ in the analytic sense, but sometimes employs problem-solving ‘communication’ activities in the ‘practice phase’ of lessons or as a means of covering the linguistic items of various kinds which still make up the covert syllabus content (see, for example, Madden & Reinhart, 1987; Nunan, 1989). That is, activities in the Bangalore Project were pre-set pedagogic tasks, not related to a set of target tasks determined by an analysis of a particular group of learners’ future needs.

The radical departure from CLT the Bangalore Project represented lay, then, not in the tasks themselves (see Greenwood (1985) for a brief critique), but in the accompanying pedagogic focus on task completion instead of on the language used in the process. Two of the more salient innovations concerned the kind of input to which pupils were exposed and the absence of overt feedback on error. With respect to input, teacher speech accompanying use of a procedural syllabus is not preselected or structurally graded, but ‘roughly tuned’ as a natural by-product of the spontaneous adjustments made to communicate with less proficient speakers inside or outside classrooms (Prabhu, 1987: 57–9). Where errors are concerned, ungrammatical learner utterances are accepted for their content, although they may be reformulated by the teacher (what Prabhu, (1987: 61) calls ‘incidental’, as opposed to ‘systematic’, correction) in the same way that a caretaker reacts to the truth value of a child’s speech and provides ‘off-record’ corrective feedback in the process. In these and other areas, Prabhu’s pedagogic proposals are strikingly similar to those of the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Presumably in part because of prevailing local cultural and educational norms and practices rather than any inherent property of procedural syllabuses, most other aspects of classroom instruction in the Bangalore Project were quite traditional. There was considerable emphasis on ‘receptive language’, classes were ‘teacher-centered’, group work was discouraged ‘because of the fear that learner–learner interaction will promote fossilization’ (Prabhu, 1987: 82), and there was little or no student–student communication. The avoidance of group work because of concerns over degenerate input, in particular, seems to have been unduly conservative in light of the research findings on interlanguage talk, which suggest that (unless peer talk is the only source of input) stabilization need not be a concern and that any such risk is outweighed by the opportunities for negotiation work possible, given the right task types (for review, see Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, 1987b).

Despite being an interesting, innovative program, and all the more praiseworthy for having been carried out under difficult teaching conditions,
the Bangalore Project has been criticized, even by sympathetic observers (see, for example, Brumfit, 1984b). One of the chief complaints has been its failure to build an evaluation component into the design (a criticism rarely made of programs using synthetic syllabuses). In an attempt to remedy this, Beretta (1986) and Beretta & Davies (1985) reported a post hoc comparison of intact groups, four project classes and four roughly comparable classes in the same schools which had been taught using the traditional structurally based program. It was found that the four traditionally taught groups outperformed project classes on a discrete-point structure test, whereas three out of four project groups did statistically significantly better on tests of listening and reading comprehension, and all four better on a 'task-based' test modeled closely on the kind of reasoning-gap inferencing tasks used extensively with the project group students. The evaluators recognized that comparison groups had not been formed randomly, and also reported that three out of four experimental groups had had 'better qualified, more highly motivated teachers' and were accustomed to being observed and treated as 'guinea-pigs' (Beretta & Davies, 1985: 123). They suggested, nevertheless, that the test results were not unfavorable to the Bangalore Project.

More important than any shortcomings in the way this particular program was implemented (see Beretta, 1989, 1990; Prabhu, 1990a, 1990b), we would suggest, is whether or not procedural syllabuses as advocated by Prabhu are in principle well motivated. The procedural syllabus in its present form presents at least three difficulties:

1. In the absence of a task-based (or, indeed, any) needs identification, no rationale exists for the content of such a syllabus, i.e. for task selection. Tasks may or may not appear to have been well conceived, but it is impossible for anyone (program staff or critics, alike) to verify the appropriateness of particular pedagogic tasks for a given group of learners without objective evaluation criteria, one of which must surely be relevance to learner needs.

2. Grading task difficulty and sequencing tasks both appear to be arbitrary processes, left partly to real-time impressionistic judgments by the classroom teacher. Use of a '50% of the task by half the class' (or any such) criterion for assessing difficulty is not a satisfactory solution, for it makes task achievement a norm-referenced issue, reveals nothing about what made one task 'easier' than another, and thereby precludes any generalizations to new materials. Moreover, if the presence of a (pedagogic) task in a syllabus is justified (non-arbitrary) at all, as we assume it should be, then a criterion-referenced approach is called for. The passing grade might vary somewhat, but if a task is a necessary part of the syllabus, it is presumably necessary for all students.

3. There are (1) logical arguments having to do with the need for comprehensible input and communication breakdowns if learners are to perceive negative evidence as such in SLA (see, e.g. Bley-Vroman, 1986; White, 1987), (2) arguments for the importance of noticing input-output mismatches for learning to take place (Schmidt, 1990, 1993), and (3) empirical findings on interlanguage development (for review, see Long, 1988), which support the need for a focus on form in language teaching, yet this is proscribed in Prabhu's (as in Krashen's) work.

Process syllabuses

A second task-based approach to course design is the process syllabus (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Breen, 1984, 1987a,b; Candlin, 1984, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987). The early rationale for process syllabuses was educational and philosophical, not psycholinguistic, with curriculum design proposals for other subject areas (e.g. Freire, 1970; Stenhouse, 1975) constituting an important influence. Type A syllabuses were rejected for their interventionist, authoritarian nature:

targets for language learning are all too frequently set up externally to learners with little reference to the value of such targets in the general educational development of the learner. (Candlin, 1987: 16–17)

A social and problem-solving orientation, with explicit provision for the expression of individual learning styles and preferences, is favored over a view of teaching as the transmission of preselected and predigested knowledge. This outlook is reflected in Candlin's rather formidable definition of task as:

one of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learner and teachers in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance offoreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu. (Candlin, 1987: 10).

Breen & Candlin's focus was and is the learner and learning processes and preferences, not the language or language-learning processes. They argue that any syllabus, preset or not, is constantly subject to negotiation and reinterpretations by teachers and learners in the classroom. In a very real sense, Candlin (1984) suggests, what a syllabus really consists of can only be discerned after a course is over, by observing not what was planned, but what took place. Both Breen and Candlin claim that learning should be and can only be the product of negotiation, and that it is the negotiation process itself that drives learning, including language learning. Hence: 'a Process
Syllabus addresses the overall question: "Who does what with whom, on what subject-matter, with what resources, when, how, and for what learning purpose(s)?" (Breen, 1984: 56).

Breen (1984) advocates replacement of the traditional conception of the syllabus as a list of items making up a repertoire of communication by one which promotes a learner’s capacity for communication:

... the emphasis would be upon the capabilities of applying, reinterpreting, and adapting the knowledge of rules and conventions during communication by means of underlying skills and abilities. In other words, an emphasis on knowing how to participate in target language communication. Of course, knowing ‘what’ and ‘how’ are interdependent; being able to share meanings entails and refines our knowledge of the systems through which meaning is conveyed. However, the emphasis of conventional syllabus design has been upon systems of knowledge external to learners rather than upon skills and abilities which learners initially bring to communication, and which they have to engage during communication. (Breen, 1984: 52)

Breen talks of incorporating a content syllabus within a process syllabus as an ‘external check’ on what students are supposed to know, but he is clear that procedural knowledge is to replace declarative knowledge as the primary element in syllabus content, and process is to replace product:

... conventional syllabus design has oriented toward language as primary subject matter... An alternative orientation would be towards the subject-matter of learning a language. This alternative provides a change of focus from content for learning towards the process of learning in the classroom situation. (Breen, 1984: 52)

The process syllabus is a plan for incorporating the negotiation process, and thereby, learning processes, into syllabus design. As described by Breen (1984), it embodies a hierarchical model, specifying sets of options at four levels, final selection among which at each level is left for users to decide on. Course design consists of providing the resources and materials needed for (1) making general decisions about classroom language learning (who needs to learn what, how they prefer to learn it, when, with whom, and so on), (2) alternative procedures for making those decisions (the basis for an eventual ‘working contract’ between teacher and learners), (3) alternative activities, such as teacher-led instruction, group work and laboratory use (for detail, see Breen, Candlin & Waters, 1979), and (4) alternative tasks, i.e. a bank of pedagogic tasks students may select from to realize the ‘activities’:

Finally, procedures are provided for formative evaluation of the effectiveness of options chosen at levels (2), (3) and (4) in accomplishing the goals agreed upon at level (1). Breen defines task as:

any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. ‘Task’ is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning — from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making. (Breen, 1987a: 23)

Published criticisms of the process syllabus (see, for example, Kouraogo, 1987; White, 1988) claim that it lacks a formal field evaluation, assumes an unrealistically high level of competence in both teachers and learners, and implies a redefinition of role relationships and a redistribution of power and authority in the classroom that would be too radical and/or culturally unacceptable in some societies. The need it creates for a wide range of materials and learning resources is also noted to be difficult to provide for and to pose a threat to traditional reliance, however undesirable, on a single textbook, which is the syllabus for most teachers, learners and examiners.

While understandable, these are concerns about the logistical feasibility of implementing process syllabuses in certain contexts, not flaws in the process syllabus itself. As such, they are not especially pertinent. After all, one would hardly fault radiography as a treatment for cancer because it is unusable without medical expertise, consenting patients and electricity. Moreover, skepticism about peoples’ desire and ability to take control of their own learning is to ignore the success of educational programs of all sorts where learners from different cultural backgrounds have done exactly that, often under the most adverse circumstances (see, e.g. Freire, 1970, 1972; Hirshon, 1983; MacDonald, 1985; Vilas, 1986), as well as 200 years of successful libertarian education (see, for example, Avrich, 1980; Holt, 1972; Illich, 1971; Spring, 1975; and issues of Libertarian Education).
More problematic, in our view, are some of the same weaknesses which we claimed were likely to limit the effectiveness of the procedural syllabus and which we think are inherent in process syllabuses.

1. Like procedural syllabuses, process syllabuses deal in pedagogic tasks whose availability (in the task ‘bank’) is not based on any prior needs identification, which raises problems for selection. We recognize that prespecification of syllabus content is precisely what Breen and Candlin seek to avoid, and accept that prespecification both in syllabuses and in the commercially published materials that embody them suffers from all the weaknesses they allege (in addition to their lack of psycholinguistic credibility). We think, however, that arbitrary selection is due to the lack of a needs identification, not to prespecification per se. Moreover, while some learners (and teachers) might in practice recognize which tasks were relevant to their future needs (assuming such tasks happened to have been included in the task ‘bank’) and choose to work on them, course designers have a responsibility to ensure that use of class time is as efficient and as relevant as possible, and that a (task-based) needs identification can help achieve that.

Preselecting pedagogic tasks on the basis of pre-identified target tasks need not mean that learner choices in other areas, such as methodology, are curtailed, although it does admittedly mean limiting the choice of tasks available. Nor need it restrict options provided at other levels in Breen’s model. To use a medical analogy, we would like to have patients able to choose from among a range of alternative treatments, but expect the physician to limit their choice to remedies for what ails them. We assume, of course, that a properly conducted needs identification makes course designers better at diagnosing learner needs (as opposed to wants) than learners themselves, an assumption which is routinely accepted in the provision of all other professional services we can think of (the medical profession being an obvious case), but recognize that this is neither inevitably true nor universally accepted where language teaching is concerned — a fact that ought to provoke serious consideration of its often-claimed status as a profession.

2. Grading task difficulty and sequencing tasks are discussed by Candlin (1987), where a variety of possible criteria are put forward, without any resolution. This is a valid reflection of the state of the art (see Crookes, 1986; Nunan, 1989 and Robinson, 1990) for discussion of these issues, but a problem for the process syllabus (and all task-based syllabuses), nonetheless.

3. A focus on language form is not addressed in prescriptions for the procedural syllabus. Given SLA findings discussed earlier, this is a weakness.

4. It is not clear to what (if any) theory or research in SLA the process syllabus is to be held accountable, as there is relatively little reference to the language-learning literature in the writing on process syllabuses. This may be a reaction to the tendency for SLA theorists to ignore general education literature when making proposals for language education. However, given the evidence for at least some uniqueness for language competence and acquisition, and given the range of theories developed to account for it, it is difficult to evaluate proposals concerning the organization of SL learning which have not been linked to this body of knowledge.

Task-based language teaching

A third approach to course design which takes task as the unit of analysis is task-based language teaching (Long, 1985, 1989, to appear; Crookes, 1986; Crookes & Long, 1987; Long & Crookes, 1987, 1992). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) bases arguments for an analytic, Type B, syllabus on what is currently known about the processes involved in second language learning (see, for example, Hatch, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), on the findings of second language classroom research (see, for example, Chaudron, 1988), and on principles of course design made explicit in the 1970s, chiefly in EFL contexts, for the teaching of languages for specific purposes (e.g. Mackay & Mountfort, 1978; Selinker, Tarone & Hanzel, 1981; Swales, 1985, 1990; Tickoo, 1988; Widdowson, 1979).

A review of descriptive and experimental studies comparing tutored and naturalistic acquisition of SL morphology and syntax suggests that formal instruction (1) has little or no effect on developmental sequences, (2) possibly has a positive quantitative effect on the use of some learning strategies, as indicated by the relative frequencies of certain error types in tutored and untutored learners, (3) clearly has a positive effect on rate of learning, and (4) probably improves the ultimate level of SL attainment (Long, 1988). Moreover, the advantages for instructed learners cannot be explained as the result of those learners having received more or better comprehensible input, which is necessary, but insufficient (cf. Krashen, 1985), for major aspects of SLA. Rather, while most current treatment of language as object is undoubtedly wasted for being unusable by learners at the time it occurs, drawing learners’ attention to certain classes of linguistic elements in the input does appear to facilitate development in several ways when certain conditions are met.

To illustrate, the following are five examples of how a focus on form may help SLA, each of which has some empirical support. Instruction in
marked or more marked L2 forms may transfer to implied unmarked or less marked items (Doughty, 1991; Eckman, Bell & Nelson, 1988; Zobl, 1985). Giving increased salience to non-salient or semantically opaque grammatical features may decrease the time needed for learners to notice them in the input (Schmidt, 1990, Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Increased planning may promote use of more complex language and, possibly, of developmentally more advanced interlingual forms (Crookes, 1989). Instruction targeted at an appropriate level may speed up passage through a developmental sequence and extend the scope of application of a new rule (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987). Overt feedback on error targeted at an appropriate level and incomprehensible input (two kinds of negative evidence) may help destabilize an incorrect rule and may even be crucial for this to happen, as in cases where the L2 is more restrictive in a given linguistic domain (White, 1989). For example, a learner’s L1 may allow two options in adverb placement, subject-verb agreement after collective nouns, or subject pronoun suppliance in discoursally marked and unmarked contexts, and the L2 only one of those options. While only one of the rules is correct when transferred to the L2, however, both may be communicatively successful with L2 speakers, with the result that the untutored learner may not receive negative feedback (because the error never causes a breakdown in communication) and so never realizes that the form is ungrammatical.

If correct, Long’s (1988) conclusions, combined with these and other potential explanations of how instructed learners come to outperform naturalistic learners, support systematic provision for a focus on form in the design of language teaching. That is, systematic use will be made of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw students’ attention to certain aspects of the target language code. Which aspects of the language, when, how, and for which learners, need to be specified in more detail, of course. The five examples above offer some suggests. Long (to appear) proposes additional ways in which learner production, both grammatical and ungrammatical, can provide teachers with cues as to when it is (in)appropriate for teachers temporarily to interrupt work on a pedagogic task to focus students’ attention on form.

If correct, the same conclusions about the effects of instruction do not, however, support a return to a focus on forms (plural) in language teaching, that is, to the use of some kind of synthetic syllabus and/or a linguistically isolating teaching ‘method’, such as ALM, Silent Way or TPR. A focus on forms is ruled out for all the arguments offered earlier against analytic Type A, syllabuses. Most important in this regard is the evidence from SLA research of the need to respect ‘learner syllabuses’ (Corder, 1967) and the related evidence against full native speaker target code forms as viable acquisition units, at the very least where beginners are concerned.

Against this background, Long and Crookes adopt task as the unit of analysis in an attempt to provide an integrated, internally coherent approach to all six phases of program design, one which is compatible with current SLA theory. There is no suggestion that learners acquire a new language one task at a time, any more than they do (say) one structure at a time. It is claimed, rather, that (pedagogic) tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners — input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities — and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty. New form-function relationships in the target language are perceived by the learner as a result. The strengthening of the subset of those that are not destabilized by negative feedback, their increased accessibility and incorporation in more intricate associations within long-term memory, complexifies the grammar and constitutes SL development.

Many target tasks (e.g. asking the way or requesting landing permission) require language use, many (e.g. digging a trench or cooking vegetables) do not, and in many (e.g. feeding an infant or buying a newspaper) language use is optional. The definitions of (both target and pedagogic) task and task type used by Long and Crookes, however, always focus on something that is done, not something that is said. Long defines (target) task using its everyday, non-technical meaning:

a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you to do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists. (Long, 1985: 89)

Similarly, Crookes defines it as

a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course or at work. (Crookes, 1986: 1)

Task-based syllabuses utilizing such conceptions of task require a needs identification to be conducted in terms of the real-world target tasks learners are preparing to undertake — buying a train ticket, renting an apartment,
reading a technical manual, solving a math problem, reporting a chemistry experiment, taking lecture notes, and so on — not in terms (say) of notions, functions, topics or situations. Bell (1981b: 159–70) describes a task-based needs identification of this sort for a canteen, or cafeteria, assistant (based on Boydell, 1970), as well as the way the resulting information can be used for diagnostic and syllabus design purposes. Swales (1990) offers examples and insightful discussion from the design of a university English for academic purposes program. Yalden (1987: 121–8) reports on the identification of the ‘task types’ relevant for a group of Canadian government officials who would be handling trade and commerce in embassies abroad. In addition, close to ready-made task-based needs analyses abound in the business world and in the public sector, e.g. in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (US Department of Labor, 1977).

Valuable expertise in procedures for conducting such needs analyses was accumulated by ESP specialists in the 1970s and 1980s (see, for example, Jupp & Hodlin, 1975; Mackay, 1978; Selinker, 1979), and can still be drawn upon, even though many of the early ESP program designers were working within a notional–functional framework. Increasingly, ESP specialists have become more aware of the complexities of needs analysis and the limitations of a purely linguistic focus (Høeå, 1981; Berwick, 1989) and have called for an increased emphasis on ‘process’; ‘we need to see students in action — what are they actually doing. And we need to observe target performers in action.’ (Robinson, 1987: 37).

Selection of tasks for inclusion in a syllabus is determined by the results of the task-based needs analysis. Learners will only rarely work on the target tasks themselves, however, especially in the early stages. That would often be too difficult, inefficient in terms of class time, logistically impossible, and irrelevant for some learners in heterogeneous classes when students’ future needs vary. Instead, target tasks are first classified into task types. To take a simple example, serving breakfast, serving lunch, serving dinner and serving snacks and refreshments, might be classified into ‘serving food and beverages’ in a course for trainee flight attendants.

Pedagogic tasks are then derived from the task types and sequenced to form the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom. They will be increasingly accurate approximations (according to criteria such as communicative success, semantic accuracy, pragmatic appropriacy, and even grammatical correctness) to the target tasks which motivated their inclusion. Since target tasks will usually be more complex than their related pedagogic tasks, increasingly accurate approximation will normally imply students addressing increasingly complex pedagogical tasks. Simplicity and complexity will not result from application of traditional linguistic grading criteria, however, but reside in some aspects of the tasks themselves. The number of steps involved, the number of solutions to a problem, the number of parties involved and the saliency of their distinguishing features, the location (or not) of the task in displaced time and space, and other aspects of the intellectual challenge a pedagogic task poses are some of the potential grading and sequencing criteria that have been proposed (for discussion, see Brown, 1986, 1989; Brown & Yule, 1983; Candlin, 1987; Crookes, 1986; Long, 1985, to appear; Robinson, 1990).

The grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks also depend in part on which of various pedagogic options are selected to accompany their use. It is here that some of the materials for writer–teacher–student negotiation of learning process urged by Breen and Candlin can be built into TBLT, and here, too, that the findings of a number of lines of SL classroom research since the late 1970s are most helpful. Relevant issues investigated include the effects on student comprehension of elaboratively, or interactationally, modified spoken and written discourse (for review, see Parker & Chaudron, 1987), the effects on student production of certain types of teacher questions (e.g. Brock, 1986; Tollefson, 1988), the quality and quantity of language use in whole-class and small group formats (e.g. Doughty & Pica, 1986; Bygate, 1988; and for review, Long & Porter, 1985), and relationships between different pedagogic task types (one-way and two-way, planned and unplanned, open and closed) and negotiation work and interlanguage destabilization (e.g. Berwick, 1988; Crookes & Rulon, 1988; Pica, 1987a; Pica, Holliday, Lewis & Morgenthaler, 1989; Varonis & Gass, 1985; and for review, Crookes, 1986; Long, 1989; Nunan, 1989; Pica, 1987b).

Such task-based syllabuses would usually, although not exclusively, imply assessment of student learning by way of task-based criterion-referenced tests, whose focus is whether or not students can perform some task to a given criterion, not their ability to complete discrete-point grammar items. While beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice it to say that developments in criterion-referenced language testing since the late 1970s (see, for example Brown, 1989a, 1989b) hold great promise for language teaching in general and for TBLT in particular.

TBLT has potential, chiefly because of its compatibility with research findings on language learning, its principled approach to content selection, and its attempt to incorporate findings from classroom-centered research when making decisions concerning the design of materials and methodol-
focus on form, that they are some. There are no doubt others.

1. We have here sketched a psycholinguistic rationale for TBLT. Its research base is, as yet, limited, however, and some of the classroom research findings referred to may bear alternative interpretations, given the small scale and questionable methodology of some of the studies involved.

2. Given an adequate needs analysis, selection of tasks is relatively straightforward. Assessing task difficulty and sequencing pedagogic tasks is more of a problem. After reviewing a substantial body of SL work on sequencing, Schinnerer-Erben concluded:

"[The criterion which is commonly used to establish traditional sequences are rather feeble. Difficulty is not easily defined and it is of questionable value. Frequency/utility is also difficult to establish and has not been proven helpful in the learning process. And natural sequences do not really exist in sufficient detail to be used as the basis for a precise order, nor have they been shown to facilitate learning in a second language situation. (Schinnerer-Erben, 1981: 11)"

Little empirical support is yet available for the various proposed parameters of task difficulty, either, and little effort has been made even to define some of them operationally (but see Brown, 1989). Indeed, identification of valid, user-friendly sequencing criteria is one of the oldest unsolved problems in language teaching of all kinds (for useful discussion, see Widdowson, 1968: 134-44).

3. There is also the problem of finiteness, which afflicts all units we have discussed. How many tasks and task types are there? Where does one task end and the next begin? How many levels of analysis are needed? What hierarchical relationships exist between one level and another? For example, just as we criticized topic and situation for their vagueness and for the tendency for examples of each to overlap, so it must be recognized that task sometimes has the same problem. Some tasks, e.g., doing the shopping, either could or will involve others, e.g., catching a bus, paying a fare, choosing purchases, paying for purchases, and so on, and some of these 'sub-tasks' could easily be broken down still further, e.g., paying for purchases divided into counting money and checking change.

4. TBLT is relatively 'structured', in the sense of pre-planned and guided. While we have argued for this in terms of efficiency and relevance to students' needs, others could equally well object to the lesser degree of learner autonomy that the structuring admittedly produces. They could claim that general learning processes need more protection than task relevance, and that if this is done, language learning will take care of itself.

5. While several classroom studies have been conducted of various issues in TBLT, no complete program that we know of has been implemented and evaluated which has fully adopted even the basic characteristics of TBLT sketched here, much less the detailed principles for making materials design and methodological decisions discussed elsewhere (Long, to appear). There are also few commercially published materials based on ideas of this sort, although (as described by White, 1988: 63-4) the BBC's (British Broadcasting Corporation) 'Get By In' series, e.g., 'Get By In Italian' (BBC, 1981) appears to be relevant, as most certainly are some materials produced for an on-going 'content-based' program in Vancouver secondary schools (Early, Mohan & Hooper, 1989; Early, Thew & Wakefield, 1985; Mohan, 1986). A few programs have been reported which reflect some principles of TBLT (e.g., Yalden & Bosquet, 1984; Yalden, 1987; and see references in Breen, 1987), and some intellectually related small-scale efforts, accompanied by in-house materials development, are currently in various stages of implementation in Canada, Japan, the Philippines and Hawai'i. Not one of these innovations has been subjected to the kind of rigorous, controlled evaluation we think essential, however. We are therefore urging consideration of partly untested proposals.

Generic problems with analytic syllabuses

Advocates of process syllabuses, procedural syllabuses and TBLT differ in the psycholinguistic rational for their proposals, in the ways they define task, in whether they conduct a formal needs analysis to determine syllabus content, in how tasks are selected and sequenced, and in the methodological options, such as group work and a focus on form, that they prescribe and proscribe. Their proposals may well differ in other areas, too, but full, comparable statements are not available for all three proposals on some issues.

However, all three proposals have some areas of agreement: most fundamentally, their rejection of synthetic syllabuses and the units of analysis on which they are based, and their adoption of task as an alternative. Consequently, all share certain problems. A serious one is the difficulty of differentiating tasks, especially tasks and 'sub-tasks' nested within them, which in turn raises questions as to the finiteness of tasks (or task types), or their 'generative capacity'. Another problem is the issue of task difficulty, i.e., of determining the relevant grading and sequencing criteria. These are
problems never resolved for synthetic syllabuses, either, of course, despite periodic discussion of such criteria as frequency, valency and (undefined and so unhelpful) ‘difficulty’, but that does not absolve users of tasks from doing better. Finally, none of the proposals has yet been subjected to a rigorous field evaluation, a situation which will be difficult to resolve as long as funding (at least in the US) continues to be allocated to ‘training’, but not research in language teaching.

Summary and Conclusion

Choice of the unit of analysis in syllabus design is crucial for all aspects of a language teaching program. A variety of units, including word, structure, notion, function, topic and situation, continue to be employed in synthetic syllabuses. While each is obviously relevant for linguistic analyses of a target language, none finds much support as a meaningful acquisition unit from a language learner’s perspective. Task has more recently appeared as the unit of analysis in three analytic, Type B alternatives: procedural, process and task syllabuses. Each of these has certain limitations, too, but when combined with a focus on form, the task finds more support in SLA research as well as practice. This should come as no surprise, for several reasons. First, even as idealized by their creators, many methods overlap considerably in terms of prescriptive and proscribed classroom practices. Second, any differences tend to become fuzzier as implemented in practice, especially over time. Third, research consistently shows ‘method’ not to be a very salient construct for teachers, who, the same studies show, neither plan, nor implement, nor recall lessons in terms of methods, but as a series of activities or tasks. (For review of supporting literature, see Long, in press.)

2. Wilkins (1976: 2) classifies situational, notional and functional syllabuses as analytic. In a later section, we will try to show that, while this may be possible in theory, as implemented in practice, they have been synthetic.

3. Reflecting an apparent change of heart, the first and sixth (of ten) advantages claimed for notional-functional syllabuses by Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983: 17) are that they ‘set realistic learning tasks’ and allow teachers ‘to exploit sound psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and educational principles’.

4. Most people would agree that ‘The last TESOL convention’ is clearly a topic, for example, but even a brief conversation about it could quickly involve such matters as which of the speakers attended, travel to and from the site, the city and state it was held in, the Equal Rights Amendment, hotel arrangements, cost, professional acquaintances sighted, the publishers’ exhibit, publishers’ parties attended, publishers’ commercial presentations, the job fair, possibly some reference to an academic presentation or two, and evaluative judgments about the whole ‘fiesta’. Are these other topics, related topics, unrelated but co-occurring topics, sub-topics, the same ‘general topic’, or what? Further, would a different group of people discussing the same topic(s) cover the same ground?

5. See discussion above (under the heading of ‘Structure’) on the unlikelihood of synthetic SL learning.


7. 70% is accepted as a satisfactory minimum passing grade on many criterion-referenced language tests, but higher cut-off points favor increased decision dependability for such tests. (See Brown (1989a, 1989b) for discussion of this and related issues.)

8. Possible exceptions arise when the learners are advanced, mature, and culturally or professionally accustomed to self-directed learning. See Allwright (1981) and Littlejohn (1985).

Notes

1. ‘Method’ appears here in inverted commas because there is good reason to believe that methods do not exist — at least, not where they would matter if they did, in the classroom. Classroom observational studies provide little evidence that supposedly different methods translate into different patterns of classroom language use by teachers and students, although it should be noted that all studies known to us to date have involved synthetic, Type A syllabuses, materials and methodology. This should come as no surprise, for several reasons. First, even as idealized by their creators, many methods overlap considerably in terms of prescribed and proscribed classroom practices. Second, any differences tend to become fuzzier as implemented in practice, especially over time. Third, research

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2 Task-based Syllabus Design: Selecting, Grading and Sequencing Tasks

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate some of the concerns and problems confronting those wishing to incorporate 'task' as a central element in syllabus planning and development. Within the field of language curriculum design, a traditional distinction is drawn between syllabus design and methodology. The former is concerned with the selection, justification and sequencing of linguistic and experiential content, while the latter is concerned with the selection, justification and sequencing of learning tasks and activities. However, with the development of communicative approaches to language teaching, this distinction has become difficult to sustain, as the 'what' and 'how' of the curriculum begin to merge (see, for example, Breen, 1984).

Incorporation of 'task' as a basic element in the design phase of the curriculum has created significant problems for grading and sequencing because of the number of factors involved, and the interaction between these factors. While a healthy research agenda has developed in recent years, the conceptual and empirical thrust of this research has been methodological in flavor, focusing on psycholinguistically motivated rationales for selecting and sequencing tasks. The dilemma for the syllabus designer, however, is on selecting and sequencing tasks which are not only psycholinguistically motivated, but which are also related in some principled fashion to the things which the learner might actually or potentially wish to do outside the classroom (see, for example, Long & Crookes, Chapter 1, this volume). The