Task-based Syllabus Design

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1. Introduction

Traditional approaches to curriculum design and development draw a three-way distinction between syllabus design, methodology and assessment / evaluation. Syllabus design is concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying content. Methodology is concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying learning experiences and processes. Assessment is concerned with measuring learner outcomes, and evaluation is concerned with determining how well the curriculum has served the needs of the learners.

From this traditional perspective, task selection and design has to do with methodology, and the notion of 'task-based syllabus design' is a contradiction in terms. However, with the emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT) this all changed. CLT reconceptualized language, not as lists of content to be memorized, but as sets of procedures for achieving communication. From this point of view, the distinction between syllabus design and methodology became difficult to sustain. Certainly, the view presented in this paper is that the use of 'task' as a basic building block for syllabus design is justifiable.

2. Alternative approaches to syllabus design

In addition to support from CLT, the centrality of 'task' was reinforced by a distinction that was drawn between 'synthetic' and 'analytic' syllabus design. These two terms were coined in a seminal publication in 1976 by David Wilkins. All syllabuses, he suggested, fitted one or other of these approaches.

In 'synthetic' approaches,

Different parts of the 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. (Wilkins, 1976: 2)

Such approaches represent the 'traditional' way of organizing the syllabus, and reflect the common-sense belief that the central role of instruction is to simplify the learning challenge for the student. One way to simplify learning is to break the content down into its constituent parts, and introduce each part separately and step-by-step.
In the case of second language acquisition, however, it seemed that learners did not acquire one item perfectly one at a time. Rather they learned numerous items imperfectly all at once. In addition, the learning was unstable. An item that appeared to have been acquired at one point in time appeared to have been 'unlearned' at a subsequent point in time (Ellis, 1994).

Research into processes of second language acquisition would appear to offer support for the alternative offered by Wilkins to synthetic syllabuses. These are known as 'analytical' approaches because the learner is presented with holistic 'chunks' of language and is required to analyze them, or break them down into their constituent parts.

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. ... [Such approaches] are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language that are necessary to meet these purposes. (Wilkins, 1976: 13)

All syllabus proposals that do not depend on a prior analysis of the language belong to this second category. In addition to task-based syllabuses, we have project-based, content-based, thematic, and text-based syllabuses. Despite their differences, they all have one thing in common - they do not rely on prior analysis of the language into its discrete points.

3. Defining 'task'

Before proceeding further, I need to define the central concept behind this presentation. In doing so, I will draw a basic distinction between what I will call real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom.

Long (1985: 89) frames his approach to task-based language teaching in terms of target tasks, arguing that a task is

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, talking 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.

The first thing to notice about this definition is that it is non-technical and non-linguistic. It describes the sorts of things that the person-in-the-street would say if asked what they were doing. (In the same way as learners, if asked why they are attending a Spanish course, are more likely to say, "So I can