

Syllabus Design in Content-Based Instruction

- This paper explores the relationship between content-based second language instruction and so-called communicative language teaching and traces the development of syllabus design for second language courses from its emergence as an issue in the mid '70s to the present day. The paper argues that content, when combined with a concern for communicative function and grammatical structure, provides the missing third dimension in syllabus design for second language courses and generates course designs superior to those based on structure alone or on some combination of structure and function. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the problems in, and the prospects for, developing this kind of syllabus for such courses.

Communicative Language Teaching, Content-Based Instruction, and Syllabus Design

In a brilliant, if somewhat neglected, paper the late H. H. Stern (1981) identified and discussed two major, and largely unreconciled, versions of what had become (and still remains) the dominant approach to second language teaching, that is, "communicative" language teaching (CLT). One—mainly European (and, especially, British)—he dubbed the *L-* (for linguistics) *approach*, because it derived from new kinds of linguistic analyses—not analyses based on linguistic forms like phonemes, morphemes, and syntactic structures but analyses based on such semantic elements as notions and functions and particular speech acts. The other—mainly American—approach he dubbed the *P-* (for psychology and pedagogy) *approach*, because it derived not from any kind of linguistic analysis but from studies of learners and the language-learning process. This approach is mainly concerned with establishing the kinds of conditions under which learners learn second languages best and the kinds of activities most likely to facilitate second language learning.

Since the *L*-approach generated a new kind of content for language courses, it led naturally to work on syllabus design, to what Munby (1978) called *communicative syllabus design*, and to the work of Wilkins (1976), Van Ek (1975), and many others on so-called *notional* syllabuses. Since the *P*-approach was based on process studies, it led

naturally to work on methodology, to such new ways of teaching as Total Physical Response (Asher, 1969) and The Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). It is interesting that each of these approaches was weakest where the other was strong, the L-approach having little to say about how semantic units should be taught, and the P-approach having little to say about what the content of a language course should be.

Content-based instruction (CBI) is clearly a descendant of the P-approach, in the sense that it consciously rejects the common sense notion that the content of a language course should be language. A basic premise of CBI is that people do not learn languages, then use them, but that people learn languages *by* using them. Thus in the surprisingly extensive list of works on CBI (e.g., Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Crandall, 1987, to name just three of the book-length treatments), there is very little detailed discussion of syllabus design for content-based courses. By detailed I mean discussion of how a content-based syllabus for a class of second language learners would differ from one for a class of native English-speakers. The best work addressing this particular problem is that of Mohan and his colleagues (e.g., Early, 1990; Mohan, 1986), but most of those promoting CBI seem to assume that in this area (as opposed to methodology, an area in which differences are widely recognized and discussed) content-based courses for second language learners are no different from other subject matter courses, an assumption which I believe to be false for reasons which I will discuss in the third section of this paper.

On the other hand, CBI does provide content for courses in a natural way—the subject matter to be studied—and although I will argue that this kind of content does not, in the form that courses for native speakers employ, constitute the proper content for content-based *second* language courses, I will also argue, in the next section, that it does constitute the proper place to begin. And I will argue, more broadly, that CBI represents a very promising way of redefining CLT in a more comprehensive and unified manner.

The Case for the Content-Based Syllabus

It would hardly be revolutionary to say that the advent of the notional syllabus in the 1970s (Wilkins, 1976, provides a convenient starting point) was the beginning of serious discussion of the syllabus in modern ESL (or British ELT) circles. It might, in fact, be more accurate to say that the subject of syllabus design for language courses barely existed as an issue in the field before the notional syllabus was offered, about 15 years ago, as a more enlightened approach to the problem of designing second language courses than what was come to be known as the *structural* or *grammatical* syllabus, a type of syllabus so well established among the course designers of the day that few

of them had considered the possibility of organizing a course in any other way. Since that time, however, it has become a commonplace of the field that the older structural syllabus is based on some set of the grammatical forms of a language, as identified by the typical linguistic analysis of forms (phonological, lexical, and morpho-syntactic), whereas the newer notional syllabus is based on some set of the notions and functions of a language, as identified by some kind of semantically based text or discourse analysis (see Yalden, 1983 for an excellent summary of the history, to the early '80s, of syllabus design in second language teaching).

From that major premise, the substantial body of work that was published in the '70s on syllabus design for second language courses developed around two major arguments: first, that the notional syllabus, or some form of communicative syllabus, was superior to the structural syllabus (a literature devoted to explaining what this newer type of syllabus was and why it was better than earlier types, e.g., Wilkins, 1976), and, within a few years, that the notional syllabus was not as wonderful as its proponents thought it was (a kind of backlash literature devoted to exploring some of the limitations of this kind of syllabus, e.g., Brumfit, Paulston, & Wilkins, 1981). In the '80s, a more descriptive tradition developed. Most recent work on syllabus design takes one of three tacks—historical (there now being some history to record, e.g., Yalden, 1983); how-to (syllabus design having been recognized as an integral part of course and program design, e.g., Dubin & Olshain, 1986; Yalden, 1987); and survey of types (e.g., Krahnke, 1987, which includes some discussion of CBI)—or some combination of these (e.g., Prabhu, 1987, which introduces the *procedural* syllabus, in my opinion one kind of content-based syllabus; it is virtually identical with Krahnke's *task-based* syllabus). The current feeling seems to be that just as there is no one best method for teaching a second language, so there is no one best syllabus type. This may be literally true but can be pushed too far. I will argue below that the best syllabus for a second language course, though it may differ from others in detail, will always meet certain criteria (Krashen, 1983, advances a similar argument for methods).

In any case, the controversy provoked in the '70s by the claims for the notional syllabus was never really resolved. It simply petered out. It soon became apparent that the so-called *notional-functional approach* had almost nothing to contribute to many of the questions—questions of method and materials, for example—that second language teachers are most concerned with answering. From a purely theoretical point of view, however, the trouble with both sides of this controversy was that they based their positions on a concept of competition between two major syllabus types (with a third, minor type—the so-called *situational* syllabus—having some limited usefulness), but this view of the issue is misleading. These two approaches to syllabus

design are not contradictory but complementary. Both the notional syllabus recently in vogue and the structural syllabus of an older period can best be understood not as simple alternative approaches to syllabus design but as direct applications of the major theoretical work of their times on the subjects of language and second language learning and, therefore, as part of a larger, ongoing developmental process. As the scope of linguistic inquiry has increased, so has the scope of syllabus design, from a one-dimensional concern with grammatical form to a broader, two-dimensional concern with both grammatical form and communicative function. Since this increase in scope has breached the old wall between the study of language as a formal system and the study of systems of communication, it does, I would immediately concede, constitute a major breakthrough in second language teaching. But I would also argue for still another level of development embodied in the content-based syllabus, which represents a still broader conception of language and second language learning and attempts to apply insights from still newer research on these subjects. Just as the notional syllabus is best viewed as an extension and development of the structural syllabus (not, as noted, a mere alternative to it), so the content-based syllabus is best viewed as a still newer attempt to extend and develop our conception of what a syllabus for a second-language course should comprise, including a concern with language form and language function, as well as a crucial third dimension—the factual and conceptual content of such courses.

More specifically, the structural syllabus is best viewed as a direct application of the notion of *competence*—a speaker's largely unconscious knowledge of the grammar of any language he can speak (as opposed to *performance*, the speaker's real language behavior which must, of course, be based on competence and perhaps additional sets of sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules). This notion also includes most of the pre-Chomsky work in descriptive linguistics, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, the controversies that raged over Chomsky's transformational-generative model having to do little with the scope of linguistics but more with the nature of the systems of rules that constitute the grammars of human languages. For most of the competing approaches to linguistics, grammar remained the proper object of inquiry until a few scholars, mainly sociolinguists, began to argue for a broader conception of language as a system for generating not only grammatical sentences but also genuine communicative acts. And for a few applied linguists, it was these ideas that led to the notion of the notional syllabus, which I believe is best viewed as a direct application of the notion of *communicative competence*—a speaker's knowledge of what is not only possible (i.e., grammatical) in a language, but also appropriate in particular contexts where people use language for real communicative purposes. It is important to note

that this conception of language includes the earlier conception but expands upon it, just as the notional syllabus includes some description of the grammar of the language to be learned (in the form of *exponents* for the notions and functions) but treats it as just one subsystem of rules for realizing a speaker's ideas, feelings, and intentions, which in turn involve another subsystem of different kinds of rules, that is, the rules of discourse.

Widdowson (1979) has proposed a model of language incorporating both of these systems of rules, which he calls *rules of usage* (i.e., grammatical rules of the kind on which the structural syllabus is based) and *rules of use* (i.e., discourse rules of the kind on which, together with grammatical rules, the notional syllabus is based). But Widdowson's system is even more inclusive. He also argues that a speaker must master what he calls *procedures* for negotiating meaning in specific real world contexts, and these correspond more closely to Chomsky's unspecified *rules of performance*, which neither of the syllabus types just referred to deals with in any serious way. In fact, these procedures are not rules at all. In reality, as Widdowson (1981) notes, human language behavior is not so much rule-governed as merely rule-referenced (p. 19). And, if Widdowson is right, as I think he is, something more than rules is required for learning how to use a new language in the real world, where the forms that are needed and the precise language acts that must be performed are, nearly always, to some extent unpredictable.

The problem is that learning rules is not enough, even if the rules of discourse are included. Rules are abstractions which normally apply only in token or typical situations. They cannot tell learners exactly what to say in particular cases, in which they must often make a judgment as to what should be said or how to interpret what someone else has said. Real language learning is most likely to occur when the context of that learning is not only typical, but real, when the learners are not merely acting out roles but trying to use their new language to fulfill genuine communicative purposes. In real language use, speakers do not begin with a list of either forms or functions that they wish to produce, but with a subject that they happen to be interested in and would like to learn more, or say something, about. Language syllabus designers, however, have not been much concerned with the purposes of learners, other than linguistic purposes, nor with subjects, so much as with the language of subjects, which most learners do not find especially interesting. Thus the missing third dimension in syllabus design is, I would argue, subject matter or content, and a real concern for subject matter is what most distinguishes the content-based syllabus from other syllabus types.

Content, in this kind of syllabus, is not merely something to practice language with; rather, language is something to explore content with. Such a syllabus does not begin with a list, or any selection from a

list, of either forms or functions, but with a topic (or topics) of interest—a network of issues, concepts, and facts which a skillful instructor can bring to life for some particular group of students—an approach that coincides with what we know about human learning in general and second language learning in particular.

As a number of psycholinguists have noted (e.g., Rumelhart, 1980), people do not acquire or store knowledge in the form of random lists of facts but in what is known as cognitive structure, a kind of picture of the world (Smith, 1975) that each of us carries around in his or her head and to which everything we know is related. Thus, acquiring new knowledge always entails relating new information to what the learners already know, to the networks of knowledge, now often called *schemata*, of which their cognitive structures are composed. Before learners can begin to make such sense of a subject (before it can, for them, become a subject of interest), they must therefore acquire what Grabe (1986) has called a “critical mass” of information on that subject—that is, sufficient information to give that subject a shape of the kind that I have just referred to as a network of issues, concepts, and facts. If, for example, I were to say, “It takes good outside shooting to beat a zone defense,” some readers of this article would be hard-pressed to say what I was talking about (although there are no words in this sentence that an educated reader could not define), whereas others would instantly recognize my remark as a common observation about the game of basketball. Moreover, as a number of scholars in our field have noted, language learning is essentially a natural process in which students learn or acquire the language by using it, not by memorizing rules or doing meaningless drills, and by using it to fulfill real communicative needs. Widdowson (1981) says, simply, “acquisition and use are essentially the same phenomenon” (p. 21), but, as I have tried to show, normal use cannot take place in the absence of a genuine subject of interest.

Given these insights into the way that people learn, and the way that they learn second languages, the crucial role of content in the language-learning process can be defined in relation to two basic learning problems.

There is, first of all, the problem of knowledge (for researchers, the *cognitive* variables). For learners to make normal use of a language—the usual condition for successful acquisition—they must apply it to subjects they know something about (for which they have acquired the relevant schemata), and subjects they know something about in that language. They must develop some skill in the use of the language forms and routines needed for dealing with those subjects in whatever ways they may have to deal with them. But in the process of acquiring the key knowledge and skills, it is content which, when a course is built around it, will eventually provide that critical mass of information on the subject that will make it increasingly

comprehensible. And in using the language to make sense of that subject, it is content, not form or function, that the learner will attend to. But it is just that kind of use, and that kind of attention, which results in the real acquisition of language.

Almost equally important is the problem of feeling (for researchers, the *affective* variables)—the learners’ feelings that a subject really matters in some way that relates to their personal values and beliefs. The learners need to not only know about subjects, but care about them, if their study of those subjects is to evoke a normal learning experience. This point is, I think, very closely related to Stevick’s (1976) notion of *depth* (pp. 34-36), and what some colleagues of mine call *engagement*—the personal involvement of the learner in the learning, at a level which guarantees real interest in it. There is, after all, no better motivation for learning a language than a burning desire to express an opinion in that language on a subject that one really cares about. In fact, it is only when that happens, I suspect, that most learners begin to take a serious interest in the problems of language forms and language functions, that is, in the problem of how to say it right.

By this time, I hope that I have made it plain that, like the notional syllabus, the content-based syllabus should not be considered a mere alternative to earlier types but a logical extension and development of them. At its best, this kind of syllabus incorporates all three dimensions of the good language course—the dimensions of content, function, and form.

Such a syllabus must, of course, be concerned with language form and function wherever they constitute problems for a learner, as they frequently do. To understand a lecture on any subject of interest, a learner must comprehend most of the words and structures that the speaker employs. To write a paper on that subject, he or she must have some understanding of what it means to compose written discourse in that language. But in the format provided by a content-based syllabus, these linguistic forms and functions are never ends in themselves but simply means of achieving communicative ends—of comprehending or producing information on a subject that the learners are exploring simply because they are interested in it. The structural syllabus tends to treat its content as mere tokens of various grammatical structures, and even the notional syllabus, concerned as it is with teaching for communicative purposes, approaches content mainly as a sampling of key discourse types—which, I think, is why both kinds of courses have a way of breaking down into a disjointed series of old familiar language lessons that do not have the feel of the normal learning process. By contrast, in focusing on real subject matter, the content-based syllabus provides a kind of natural continuity, creates genuine occasions for the use of those procedures for negotiating meaning that Widdowson identified, and tends to

pull all three dimensions of language learning together around a particular communicative goal.

The Content-Based Syllabus: Problems and Prospects

During its brief 10 to 15 years of existence, content-based instruction has clearly prospered. From K-12 immersion programs to the adjunct courses offered at colleges and universities (see Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989 for discussion of the various kinds of content-based courses), this approach has attracted widespread interest and support. In American university ESL programs, it may in fact have become, in one form or another, the most popular method currently employed (Casey, 1991). At my own university, probably the first to implement what Brinton, Snow, and Wesche call *theme-based language instruction*, we are more convinced than ever that this approach to language teaching is the best one that has been developed so far, at least for the kind of populations we serve. Student reaction has been consistently good, the first sign of which was a massive increase in the quantity of comments on our evaluation forms (which suggests that all the jokes that end with the punchline, "First, you have to get their attention" have some basis in fact). In the main, students seem to find such courses interesting, challenging, and relevant to their experience as students in the American university system. Faculty, too, seem to favor these courses, finding them, as do students, far more interesting, if more difficult to teach, than our more traditional language skills courses. And, finally, many others who have tried such courses have reported a considerable measure of success (e.g., Hauptman, Wesche, & Ready, 1988).

But we have also discovered that our courses—and by extension, any courses built around a content-based syllabus—have their limitations and generate certain specific problems. Two are especially troublesome.

The first is the problem of relating language form to language function and content in this kind of syllabus. This is the old accuracy/fluency problem, and content-based courses tend to come down hard on the side of fluency. Content and function flow rather smoothly together, being complementary aspects of language as a system for communication, but attending to grammar in any systematic way is difficult within communicative paradigms. One major reason may be the absence of insightful theoretical work on the relationship between grammatical form and discourse function (discourse studies are expanding dramatically but are still relatively underdeveloped); but there are also those who would argue that grammar cannot be taught (although, of course, it can be learned), and that the notion of somehow attending to it directly is simply misguided. As students learn to communicate in a language, so this argument runs, they will

acquire whatever grammar they need. But those of us who work with real students in the real world have seen too many apparent counterexamples—speakers and writers of a fluent but ungrammatical English, a kind of pidginized ESL—to find this very convincing (see Eskey, 1983, for further discussion). It seems to me that on the issue of how to teach linguistic forms, or how to insure that they will be learned, we don't really even know the right questions to ask.

A second important (and perhaps related) problem is the student who does not make normal progress in the course. One reservation I have about learning by doing is that those who don't do well don't learn. Content-based instruction can provide students with genuine opportunities for learning, but it is far from clear to me what should be done for a student who cannot seem to exploit these opportunities. I am speaking of a small minority, and the answer may be "nothing": It may be that a certain percentage of students are, for any number of a wide range of reasons, incapable of learning a second language well. (An old friend of mine used to insist that one basic principle of education is that "Salvation is not compulsory.") If that is true, then no kind or amount of teacher intervention could make very much difference, but the trouble is we don't really know that it is true. For some students, a more structured approach might be better.

The real source of both these problems, I suspect, is that we have never come to terms with the fact that what we teach in any kind of content-based course is not the content itself but some form of the discourse of that content—not, for example, "literature" itself (which can only be experienced) but how to analyze literature; not "language" (in the sense of de Saussure's *langue*) but how to do linguistics. For every body of content that we recognize as such—like the physical world or human cultural behavior—there is a discourse community—like physics or anthropology—which provides us with the means to analyze, talk about, and write about that content; but these are culture-specific communities to which students must be acculturated.

Thus for teachers the problem is really how to acculturate students to the relevant discourse communities, and for students the problem is really how to become acculturated to those communities. Since each of these specialized communities grows out of, and remains embedded in, the larger discourse community of the speakers of the language being learned, the content of courses for nonnative speakers (by definition members of another culture, another major discourse community) cannot be exactly the same as the content of courses for native-speaking learners, who are normally much better attuned to the assumptions, conventions, and procedures of their own discourse communities. With respect to all of these, courses for second-language learners should be far more explicit than those for native speakers, but this principle assumes that the designers of such courses know (in the sense of having conscious knowledge of) what these

assumptions, conventions, and procedures are, an assumption that is largely unjustified at this time. In this area, the best work is being done by scholars specializing in ESP, often in relation to academic writing (e.g., Johns, 1986, 1991; Swales, 1990; see also Campbell, 1990), but we have a long, long way to go.

Still, I think we have arrived at what I would call Phase 2 in the design of content-based courses, a phase of what I hope will be extensive fine tuning of this fundamentally sound approach, especially in the area of syllabus design. The first step will be to recognize the problem, to discard the false assumption that content-based courses for nonnative speakers should differ from courses for native English-speakers in methodology but not in content. The second step will be to develop, through research, much more explicit knowledge of what the kinds of discourse we want to teach consist of—an especially challenging research agenda because it entails our achieving a better understanding of ourselves and some of our most basic, and normally unexamined, assumptions and values. The final step will be to build this new knowledge into content-based syllabuses for our students. Such work might even have implications for subject matter courses for native-speaking students in a society as diverse as our own, which is (at least in principle) committed to providing every student with the maximum opportunity to develop his or her academic potential. There is currently substantial evidence that many of our children—minority children, in particular—enter our school improperly prepared to deal with the culture they encounter there (e.g., Gee, 1990; Heath, 1986). A more explicit understanding of what these children need to know in order to perform more successfully in our schools might provide us with the means to alleviate this problem.

Of course, even if we were to succeed in developing more explicit versions of CBI for second language learners (and other culturally different populations), there would still be a certain irony in the fact that the best syllabus for a second language course might end up looking a good deal like a syllabus for any other kind of course. Have we come around at last to organizing our teaching in the way that our brains have always organized our learning in our day-to-day lives? That would seem to confirm both the scientist Einstein's observation that if we could see far enough, what we would see—space being curved—is the backs of our own heads, and the poet Eliot's (1962) observation that "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (p. 145). But perhaps that should merely reassure us. Innovative ideas have a way of turning out to be reasoned explanations of what our intuitions tell us, and I suspect that the content-based syllabus, with its stress on our culture's normal use of language to explore issues of real interest to students, may turn out to be what we have been looking for all along. ■

Footnotes

1. Parts of the remainder of this paper appeared in much earlier form in Eskey, D. E. (1984). Content: The missing third dimension in syllabus design. In J. A. S. Reid (Ed.). *Case studies in syllabus and course design. RELC Occasional Papers*, 31, 66-77.

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