

CHAPTER 5: SYLLABUS TYPES

5.1 Introduction

Until recently, one syllabus type has dominated in language teaching. According to Yalden (1987:19), this syllabus type "generally consisted of two components: a list of linguistic structures (the 'grammar' to be taught) and a list of words (the lexicon to be taught)". This type of syllabus is usually called a structural or grammatical syllabus. Many teaching methods were derived from this type of syllabus. Examples of these methods are the Audiolingual Method, Situational Language Teaching as well Grammar-Translation (cf. Richards & Rodgers, 1994:31-63 and Yalden, 1987:21).

This type of syllabus reflects a synthetic approach to language teaching and learning (Yalden, 1987:21). The synthetic approach to syllabus design is one in which the different language items are taught step-by-step. Language acquisition is thus a gradual accumulation of small parts and it is the responsibility of the learner to "resynthesize" the language that has been taught (Yalden, 1987:21).

However, in the synthetic approach to syllabus, meaning (other than lexical meaning) didn't play a very important role in language. In this type of syllabus semantic meaning was thought to be self-evident and wasn't taught as such (Yalden, 1987:26). This shortcoming paved the way for a new approach to syllabus design - the analytic approach. According to Yalden (1987:28), "within such an approach a semantic, meaning-based syllabus is produced which leads (again via various pedagogical strategies) to a somewhat wider goal: that of communicative competence". This type of syllabus is then also known as the "semantic syllabus" (Yalden, 1987:33).

From the analytic approach, an approach evolved which had the "goal of communication and interaction from the first day of study - at whatever age or learning level" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983:10). This new approach is called the Communicative Approach. Many teaching

syllabi and methods have been based on the Communicative Approach.

In this chapter, three different syllabus types based on the Communicative Approach are discussed. These include the Situational Syllabus, and the Functional-Notional Syllabus, and the Task-Based Syllabus, which is discussed in more detail. Lastly, the suitability of a Task-Based Syllabus to the currently prescribed curriculum for all teaching institutions in South Africa, Curriculum 2005, is investigated and discussed.

5.2 SYLLABUS TYPES AND TEACHING METHODS BASED ON THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

According to Richards and Rodgers (1994:66), syllabi and teaching methods based on the Communicative Approach aim to:

- a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching, and
- b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

These aims can be realized in many different ways, and this is why many different types of syllabi can be categorized under the heading of the Communicative Approach. These syllabi, however, have a few characteristics in common. According to Richards and Rodgers (1994:68), the focus of these syllabi would be on "communicative and contextual factors in language use".

Furthermore, such a syllabus would be "learner-centred and experience-based" (Richards & Rodgers, 1994:69). Lastly, all of these syllabi will start "from a communicative model of language and language use" and will seek to "translate this into a design for an instructional system, for materials, for teacher and learner roles and behaviors, and for classroom activities and techniques" (Richards & Rodgers, 1994:69).

The following three types of syllabi based on the Communicative Approach will be discussed:

1. The Situational Syllabus
2. The Functional-Notional Syllabus
3. The Task-Based Syllabus

5.2.1 The Situational Syllabus

The situational syllabus is closely related to the topical syllabus. According to Yalden (1987:35),

The situational model will comprise units indicating specific situations, such as 'At the Post Office', 'Buying an Airline Ticket', or 'The Job Interview'. The topical or thematic syllabus is similar, but generally employs the procedure of grouping modules or lessons around a topic, something like barnacles clinging to the hull of a ship.

In this approach, the use of dialogues is very common as these form the basis of communication within a specific situation. However, the use of dialogues in the situational syllabus is quite different from the use of dialogues in a structural syllabus such as the Audiolingual Method. In the Audiolingual Method, specific structured dialogues are drilled and memorized and used to conceptualize key structures (Richards & Rodgers, 1994:53), while the situational dialogue approach is "aimed at meaningful conversational interchange in specific contexts" (Norris as quoted by Yalden, 1987:35). This means that the dialogues used in the situational syllabus, don't have language structures as their main focus, but rather their communicative effectiveness within a given situation.

Yalden (1987:36) describes examples of situational syllabi in which students are initially presented with a "problem situation" or "illustrative situation". This "problem situation" is then followed by drills and inventions and then by "practice situations". It is thus evident that the different situations created in Situational Syllabi determine the language structures to be learnt.

The above-mentioned statement is, however, also a drawback in situational language syllabi.

While they

represent a step toward greater emphasis on the semantic component of syllabus design there is still something missing in their organization, in that the situation in which we find ourselves does not in and of itself necessarily determine all of what we want or need to say (Yalden, 1987:38).

While the aim of the Situational Syllabus is communicative competence, the nature of its contents will not necessarily lead to total communicative competence. This shortcoming led to the development of the Functional-Notional syllabus.

5.2.2 The Functional-Notional Syllabus

When dealing with this type of syllabus, it is important to first clarify the definitions of the terms used in the name. According to Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:15), the term "function" refers to the communicative purpose of the speaker. These functions can be personal, interpersonal, directive, referential or imaginative and they can either be expressed through fixed formulae in the language or communicative expressions (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983:28). Thus, the functions to be expressed depend solely on the speaker.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:14) state that specific notions can be defined as the words following the functional expression. "Notions" are thus "meaning elements which may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives, or adverbs" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983:14). Thus, notions will depend basically on three factors: the functions, the elements in the situation and the topic which is being discussed (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983:15).

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:16) also make use of another term "exponents" in order to indicate the relationship between the above-mentioned elements:

Exponents are the language utterances or statements which stem from

the function, the situation, and the topic. They are the language forms a speaker uses to express (to complete or realize) a message; to indicate an awareness of elements in the situation (social roles, for example, which will influence the formality or informality of the conversation); and to "keep to" the topic when it is important to do so, as in an interview.

They have also summarized these exponents in a diagram (cf. Fig. 5.1.)

As in the case of semantic syllabi, the starting point for the syllabus is not the lexical items of the language, but the communicative purpose of the speaker. However, differently from the Situational Syllabus, certain language structures (the notions) are purposefully chosen to achieve this aim.

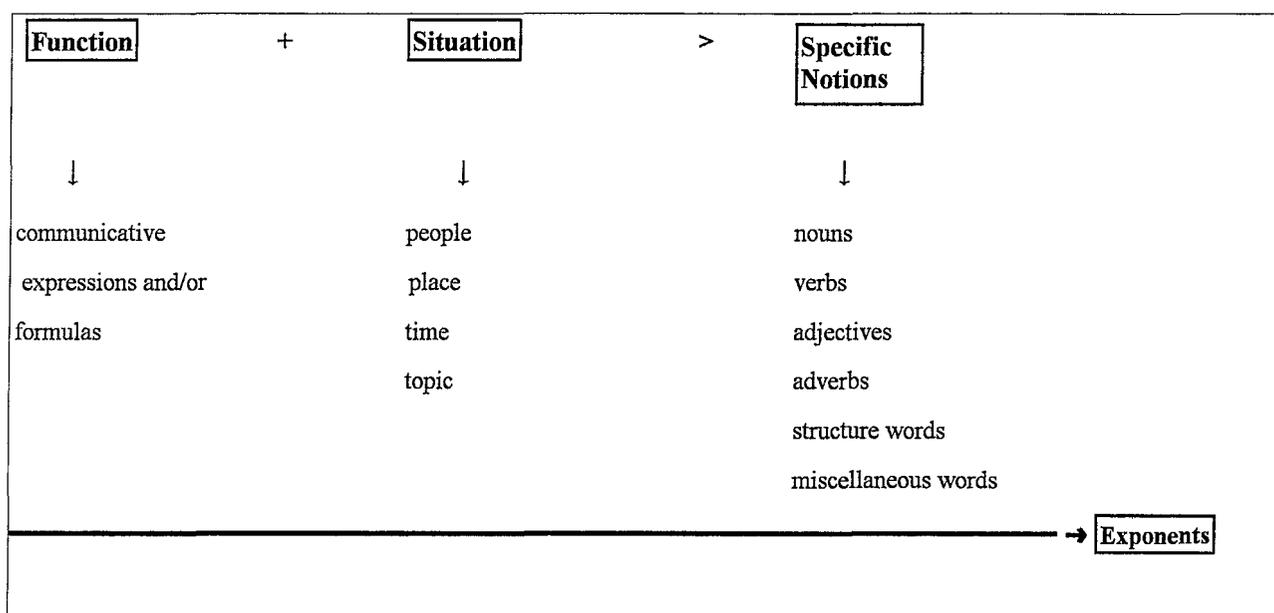


Fig. 5.1 Summary of exponents by Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983:17)

There are many advantages to this type of syllabus, as stated by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:18-19). Some of these are:

1. It sets realistic learning tasks in which full-class or individualized instruction may be utilized.
2. It provides for the teaching of *everyday, real-world* language use in a variety of sociocultural situations in which features of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and

culture are selected and graded according to their priority in actual communication, and intermeshed meaningfully from the first lesson at the beginning level of learning to serve the learner's immediate communicative purpose.

3. It leads us to emphasize the need for numerous, varied, receptive activities before rushing learners into premature performance.
4. It recognizes that while the language used in any speech act should be based on the situation or setting in which it occurs and be grammatically and semantically appropriate, the speaker must, above all, have a real purpose for speaking and something to talk about.
5. The act of communication, even at elementary levels, will be intrinsically motivating simply because it expresses *basic, universal communicative functions* of language and because it makes use of notions that are most appropriate to complete the specific function or functions being expressed.
6. It enables teachers to exploit sound psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and educational principles.
7. It can develop naturally from existing teaching methodology. Curriculum writers and teachers may, thus, use an eclectic approach, taking what has been found best and most suited to their teaching personalities from the direct, audio-lingual, structural, situational, or any other method and integrate relevant features of each into a functional-notional approach.
8. It does not insist upon mastery of any body of material when it is presented. A spiral, expandable curriculum is envisaged so that grammatical and topical or cultural materials can be studied in greater depth whenever relevant during the course.

There are very distinct differences between a structural syllabus (as used in the Audiolingual Method) and a semantic syllabus based on the Communicative Approach (as used in the Functional-Notional syllabus). Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:91-93) provide a comprehensive summary of these differences (cf. Table 5.1).

| Audiolingual Method | Functional-Notional Syllabus |
|---|---|
| Attends to structure and form more than meaning. | Meaning is paramount. |
| Demands memorization of structure-based dialogues. | Dialogues, if used, centre around communicative functions and are not normally memorized. |
| Language items are not necessarily contextualized. | Contextualization is a basic premise. |
| Language learning is learning structures, sound or words. | Language learning is learning to communicate |
| Mastery, or "over-learning" is sought. | Effective communication is sought. |
| Drilling is a central technique. | Drilling may occur, but peripherally. |
| Native-speaker-like pronunciation is sought. | Comprehensible pronunciation is sought. |
| Grammatical explanation is avoided. | Any device which helps the learners is accepted - varying according to their age, interest etc. |
| Communicative activities only come after a long process of rigid drills and exercises. | Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning. |
| The use of the student's native language is forbidden. | Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible. |
| Translation is forbidden at early levels. | Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it. |
| Reading and writing are deferred till speech is mastered. | Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired. |
| The target linguistic system will be learned through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system. | The target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate. |
| Linguistic competence is the desired goal. | Communicative competence is the desired goal (i.e. the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately). |
| Varieties of language are recognized but not emphasized. | Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methodology. |
| The sequence of units is determined solely by principles of linguistic complexity. | Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content, function, or meaning which maintains interest. |
| The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory. | Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language. |
| "Language is habit" so errors must be prevented at all costs. | Language is created by the individual often through trial and error. |
| Accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary goal. | Fluent and acceptable language is the primary goal: accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context. |
| Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in machines or controlled materials. | Students are expected to interact with people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writings. |
| The teacher is expected to specify the language that students are to use. | The teacher cannot know exactly what language students will use. |
| Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language. | Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language. |

Table 5.1: A Summary of Differences between the Audiolingual Method and the Functional-Notional Syllabus

5.2.3 The Task-Based Syllabus

Another one of the semantic syllabus types that falls under the Communicative Approach, is the Task-Based Syllabus. According to Skehan (1998:268), a task is an activity that should adhere to the following criteria:

1. Meaning is primary.
2. There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.
3. The activity is outcome-evaluated.
4. There is a real-world relationship.

From these criteria, it becomes apparent, therefore, that activities are not chosen in order to teach a specific lexical form, but that meaning is far more important. Furthermore, activities focused on language itself are not tasks, as they need to have a real-world relationship. According to Skehan (1998:268), "What counts, in task-based approaches, is the way meaning is brought into prominence by the emphasis on goals and activities". As all of these criteria are required by Outcomes Based Education, this type of syllabus could be utilised within the context of Curriculum 2005 (cf. Chapter 3).

Skehan (1996:39) also distinguishes between two forms of the task-based approach, namely a strong and a weak form. The strong form of task-based syllabus regards the task as the unit of instruction. This means that everything else that forms part of instruction are secondary. On the other hand, Skehan (1996:39) states that, in the weak form "tasks are a vital part of language instruction, but that they are embedded in a more complex pedagogic context". This means that tasks form an equal part with other teaching components in the whole process of focussed instruction. In its weak form, then (as in the case of a functional-notional syllabus), the task-based syllabus allows the teacher to adopt an eclectic approach.

Furthermore, the task-based syllabus can also be divided into two categories, determined by the person or people who choose the task. In a procedural task-based syllabus, the teacher or

syllabus designer is the decision-maker. When, however, the students choose the tasks as well as the way in which they approach these tasks, a process task-based syllabus is referred to (Skehan, 1998:269).

The drawback of task-based syllabi seems to be the same as that of the situational syllabi, namely that "processing language to extract meaning does not guarantee automatic sensitivity to form" (Skehan, 1996:41). This means that it is necessary that "if task-based approaches to instruction are to be viable, to devise methods of focusing on form without losing the values of tasks as realistic communicative motivators, and as opportunities to trigger acquisitional processes" (Skehan, 1996:42). According to Skehan (1998:276), there have been several "pedagogic explorations" to ensure that this does not happen.

According to Loschky and Bley-Vroman (as quoted by Skehan, 1998:277), tasks can be divided into three categories: possible, useful and necessary. They propose that "if a teacher wants to make progress, one has to use the third of these conditions, and devise tasks which 'force' the use of particular structures" (Skehan, 1998:277). This means all the benefits of a task based approach, namely "normal communication and triggering of acquisitional processes" (Skehan 1998:277) are combined with a systematic approach to instruction.

According to Skehan (1998:277), a different approach to choosing tasks can be taken. A lesson could start with a "real-world task", even if the language required is beyond the learners' current proficiency. This task will point them ahead and start to trigger their natural acquisitional processes, and will motivate them. "Then, pedagogic tasks are designed which are based on such real-world tasks but which are more accessible to the learner" (Skehan, 1998:277).

Skehan (1998:279) proposes five principles "to approach instruction by maximizing the chances that attention will be used effectively":

1. Identify and target a *range* of language structures to be learned.
2. Choose tasks which meet Loschky and Bley-Vroman's naturalness condition.

3. Use tasks of appropriate difficulty level.
4. Use task implementation conditions which maximise the chances that attention will be directed towards form.
5. Use periodic cycles of accountability.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned examples, there are many ways to implement the task-based syllabus in the classroom. It would be very difficult within the context of a process task-based syllabus where the students choose the activities and the way in which they are going to approach the tasks. However, in the case of a procedural task-based syllabus, the teacher has some control over the choice of activities and should therefore aim for communicative competence with the focus on meaning, and a sensitivity for the form of the language.

5.3 THE TASK-BASED SYLLABUS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM 2005

The characteristics of Curriculum 2005 have already been discussed in Chapter 2. It is now the prescribed curriculum for all levels of education in South Africa. Therefore, a type of syllabus still needs to be chosen that would meet the requirements of Curriculum 2005. This type of curriculum is outcomes based and this is the first indication that a task-based syllabus could be considered to fulfill the rest of the requirements.

According to the Department of Education (1997:6), seven Critical Cross-field Outcomes (CO's) as well as five additional outcomes which support development has been identified in Curriculum 2005 and needs to be met by a syllabus. These are:

Learners will:

1. Identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking.
2. Work effectively with others as members of a team, group, organisation and community.
3. Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively.
4. Collect, analyse and critically evaluate information.

5. Communicate effectively using visual, symbolic, and/or language skills in various modes.
6. Use science and technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environments and the health of others.
7. Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

The syllabus also needs to make the individual aware of the importance of:

- Reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.
- Participating as a responsible citizen in the life of local, national and global communities
- Being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts
- Exploring education and career opportunities, and
- Developing entrepreneurial opportunities.

Within this context, the relevance of a task-based syllabus for Curriculum 2005 can clearly be seen. All the characteristics of a task are summarised in these CO's. The task can also be designed to meet the CO's that support the personal development of the individual.

The fact that tasks have a real-world relationship also means that an English lesson would not only be restricted to linguistic situations, but will also touch on other learning areas. In Curriculum 2005 (Department of Education, 1997:4), eight such learning areas are identified.

They are:

- Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC)
- Human and Social Sciences (HSS)
- Technology (T)
- Mathematical Literacy, Mathematics and Mathematical Sciences (MLMMS)
- Natural Sciences (NS)
- Arts and Culture (AC)
- Economic and Management Sciences (EMS)
- Life Orientation (LO)

For each of these eight Learning Areas (LA's) Specific Outcomes (SO's) have been identified. The Department of Education (1997:5) defines an SO as "contextually-demonstrated knowledge, skills and attitudes, reflecting critical crossfield essential outcomes". The SO's for the learning area of Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC) are:

- Making and negotiating meaning.
- Showing a critical awareness of the use of language.
- Reacting to the aesthetic affective, cultural and social value of texts.
- Gaining access to and processing information acquired from several sources and situations.
- Having knowledge of and understanding language structures and conventions and apply them within context.
- Using language to learn.
- Using appropriate communicative strategies for specific aims and under specific circumstances.

These SO's for LLC (especially numbers 1,4,5 and 7) are all included in the definition and characteristics of a task as defined within the task-based syllabus. Tasks would thus be a very effective vehicle to guide learners in achieving these outcomes.

However, to know whether learners have actually achieved these SO's, Assessment Criteria (AC's) have been designed for each one of the SO's. According to the Department of Education (1997:3), Assessment Criteria "provide evidence that the learner has achieved the specific outcome. The criteria indicate, in broad terms, the observable processes and products of learning. The assessment criteria are derived directly from the specific outcome and from a logical set of statements of what achievement could or should look like".

Thus, when designing a syllabus, the AC's would be an indication of whether the learners have achieved the SO's or not. For each of the SO's for LLC, there are four to thirteen AC's. These can be seen in Appendix 1.

In the Foundation Phase (Grades 0-3) of Curriculum 2005:

the following three Learning Programmes are the vehicle through which the new curriculum will be implemented:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Life Skills" (Department of Education, 1997:8)

An ESL Syllabus would therefore form part of the bigger Literacy Learning Programme.

According to the Department of Education (1997:8), a Learning Programme should be organized around Programme Organizers and Phase Organizers.

Phase Organisers are a tool by which the Specific Outcomes and Assessment Criteria are grouped for planning. They ensure that important areas in the holistic development of learners are covered. The phase organisers are derived from the Critical Cross-field Outcomes (Department of Education, 1997:5).

Six Phase Organisers were identified to facilitate the planning and assessment of Learning Programmes in the Foundation Phase. They are:

- Personal development;
- Health and safety;
- Environment;
- Society;
- Entrepreneurship, and
- Communication (Department of Education, 1997:8)

These Phase Organisers are very broad, however, and to narrow them down in order to organize the syllabus, Programme Organisers are used. They relate to Phase Organisers, but are more specific.

From the above-mentioned definitions and descriptions it is obvious that a task-based syllabus would be structured differently from what Skehan proposed (i.e. identifying the range of language structures, choosing tasks which meet the naturalness condition, using tasks on an appropriate difficulty level, implementing tasks so that attention will be directed towards form, using periodic cycles of accountability). However, the core of the task-based syllabus - the task- will be very

effective in achieving the AC's.

5.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a few examples of syllabi that fall under the heading "Communicative Approach" have been discussed. Through these examples, the benefit of such an approach as well as the pitfalls have been indicated. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between the different syllabi became apparent. Through this comparison the characteristics of the different types of syllabi were indicated, as well as the development of theory surrounding Communicative Language Teaching syllabi types. Each time that a drawback was identified in a syllabus type, a new syllabus type came into being. This is a clear indication that a syllabus with the aim of communicative competence cannot be static, but should be dynamic and incorporate effective strategies from other syllabus types.

Syllabi also need to be adapted when policy changes and new curricula are prescribed in teaching institutions. This is exactly the case in South Africa. Curriculum 2005 is now the compulsory curriculum on all educational levels. At its core, the task-based syllabus is very suited to Curriculum 2005. However, it will need to be developed and constructed so that it is in line with all of the requirements of the new curriculum.