

## COMMUNICATIVE CONTENT OR COMMUNICATIVE TASKS?

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### EXHIBIT A

In a course using James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR), the teacher tells a student

When Luke walks to the window, Marie will write Luke's name on the blackboard (p. 62)<sup>1</sup>.

Marie and Luke do as requested, and the teacher approves saying, "good", and continues giving complex directives.

### EXHIBIT B

Using a functional/notional textbook, students at about the same level read a four-frame cartoon consisting of eight sentences or fragments. In the cartoon a young man and woman exchange greetings and information about where they live. Students then mimic the cartoon to perform a roleplay.

### QUESTION

In what ways is each activity communicative?

Clearly Exhibit B is communicative in that it is oriented toward potential real-life situations and feeds students with the appropriate language for such situations. That is, someday the student may actually find himself in a similar place with a similar intention and thus require the language that Exhibit B presents.

The disadvantage of Exhibit B is that the student may never need to imitate this cartoon outside the classroom. In fact, the vast majority of EFL students will assuredly never need to find out where someone lives in English. Furthermore, since language use is characteristically varied, with low levels of predictability, a student who might eventually need the language from the cartoon may well encounter language forms that are not presented in the functional unit "asking and giving information"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>References in this article are indicated by the author's name in the text and, if appropriate, by page number. See Bibliography for full publication data.

<sup>2</sup>This is especially true since no functional text is solidly based on empirical data specifying how native speakers realize functions linguistically. In fact, there is evidence that a considerable gap exists between textbook language and real-world language (see Pearson). There is also no evidence to indicate that non-native speakers realize functions in the same ways as native speakers do.

Exhibit A, on the other hand, is not oriented to a specific future use situation. On the face of it, it seems quite an arbitrary activity, almost more game than study. There is genuine language of the type a student may encounter in a target situation. Luke, Marie, and the class will surely never hear this sentence again.

What occurs in Exhibit A is, nevertheless, a genuine interactive event in a genuine context: a teacher tells a student to do something, the student does it, and the teacher approves. Sinclair's IRF discourse structure authentically takes place in English. There is a directive, response (physical), and follow-up. Interaction happens, though it is not studied.

Exhibit B uses the visual power of a cartoon to provide students with information about situation, setting, and other extra-linguistic data. The students then practice in an interesting way, using the roleplay. Exhibit B is a clear improvement over grammar-based teaching in that it specifies much more non-grammatical data, which we now understand to be crucial to communication. Yet, however much Exhibit B is an improvement over earlier methods, it still focuses primarily on studying language and drilling. But that language, transferred to the classroom, is de-contextualized; there is no need for information, there is no context of interaction. Students' attention is directed to the form of the language as an object and not directed to the purposeful accomplishment of something through the use of the target language. What English does occur in the classroom arises from a fictional scene imagined by a textbook writer and not from the real situation of a particular group of people, with particular sets of experience, gathered in a classroom to learn a foreign language.

While the *language* in Exhibit B could be made perfectly genuine (e.g., from a taped conversation), the *interaction* students perform is not genuine.

#### ACTIVITIES AND SYLLABUS DESIGN

Exhibit B reflects a syllabus organized around language-descriptive units (functions). Exhibit A suggests a syllabus organized according to a series of interactive tasks that students are to engage in. B studies the target language; A requires it.

Must we trade off authenticity of interaction for authenticity of language data? One would hope not. We should remember that real language experience is highly generalizable; Chomsky has argued that it is infinitely generalizable. Functions, as Keith Johnson (1983) points out, are not. Feeding students eight sentences or a hundred sentences does not guarantee that they will be able to "ask for and give information about themselves" in an unpredictable future situation. On the other hand, a student who can successfully formulate and respond to complex directives, play a language-intensive game, or persuade a classmate of his own point of view, that student will probably be able to exchange addresses should the occasion arise.

Most language syllabuses take their organizing principle as a list of "content" expressed as language descriptive units. Such units may reflect philosophies of language description from dozens of schools of linguistics. Syllabus content may be expressed as notions, functions, syntax, lexis, discourse types, speech acts, exchanges, "grammar", etc. A syllabus whose primary concern is the specification of content is automatically committed to one way of describing language. That language description (partial and incomplete as all linguistic description to date) tends to be presented as a list

of course contents to be “learned” (in Krashen’s sense). When students are studying English, they are not interacting in English, they are not engaged in genuine practice.

If students are to experience language firsthand, they must spend the bulk of class time performing tasks which require interaction in the target language. Such tasks may range from responding to comprehensible input to generating interlanguage to accomplish something. Of course, such tasks must be tailored to students’ previous language experience, their  $i + 1$  in Krashen and Terrell’s terms. No sequence of descriptive units will be able to anticipate the “natural chunks” (p. 162) advocated by Newmark nor will it be able to take fluency as a basis as suggested by Brumfit. I would suggest, in light of the above, that the main concern of a syllabus is not the specification of content but rather the creation of opportunities for interaction. If communicative competence (=interactive ability) is the goal of a course, syllabus design will have to concentrate first and foremost on creating the minimal pre-condition for interaction: inherently interesting language activities and situations to fill class time. A syllabus should first “set the scene” for language, and only afterwards attempt to describe the language that will correspond to those activities.

#### COURSE CONTENT

Appendix 1 lists the major elements of a syllabus: objectives, content, methodology, resources, activities, and testing<sup>3</sup>. “Content” describes what is to be taught, what is to be learned. The content of a language course is thus language, since students attend classes in order to acquire language.

Language, however, is problematic in that we can describe only bits of it, only limited perspectives on it. To date we know that language includes at least syntax, morphology, semantics, graphological conventions, cognitive processes, discourse structure, lexis, pragmatics, and phonology. Even if content could specify all the items in these categories, they would still bear no useful relationship to the acquisition process.

Yet language is, doubtless, the area in which student performance is to be augmented. The upper hemisphere of the content circle in Appendix 1 indicates four broad categories of description that have been popular in syllabus design: discourse types, grammar, functions, and vocabulary. These are not, of course, the only possible units of description; others have been used and still others could be invented.

Johnson (1979) depicts the de-emphasis of content in favor of methodology as a conflict between teacher and student control. Appendix 1 suggests that students’ decision may also determine content. Littlejohn has demonstrated that student decision can be effective in motivating students who are repeating a failed language course. While motivation to study content units is desirable, it does not in itself guarantee communicative interaction in the target language. Essentially, the content for a repeated course is the content of the failed syllabus. Students’ decision, then, merely reflects the content structure of their previous study experience. Littlejohn’s real innovation involves the methodology of his course (work in semi-independent groups)

<sup>3</sup>Finocchiaro and Brumfit (p. 49) refer to such a complete list as the “curriculum” of a course, reserving the term “syllabus” for content only.

and not the content, which students simply resuscitate from former courses. Even if students were competent to select and sequence language-descriptive units, it is unlikely that their selection would avoid the problems of teacher/designer pre-selection. The tendency would still be to study language forms rather than use language.

Students are more likely to be able to select topics about which they would like to talk or learn. A topical selection of content, whether made by designer, teacher, or student, suggests a non-language content, the lower hemisphere in Appendix 1. Unfortunately, students have no language criteria by which to select topics and will likely opt for those that are too demanding to negotiate at beginning levels of a target language. Well-chosen topics can, however, be excellent reference points around which language can grow. Success with immersion programs, where students study academic subjects through the medium of the foreign language, suggests significant advantages to focusing attention away from language itself and toward communicative purpose. In immersion programs chemistry, social science, etc. form the content of the syllabus and language is simply the vehicle of interaction (Savignon, p. 196-98). In a language course, however, learning about a list of topics is not the primary purpose, and so it can not be properly described as content; the language is still the content, the purpose of instruction. With the understanding that topics are not strictly speaking content (except in immersion programs), they are of great value for organizing courses in non-linguistic terms that are readily intelligible to students. They also have the important advantage of drawing attention away from the language as object and toward the language as means of accomplishing purposes. They serve as a convenient interface between the non-target language experience students bring to class and the content *per se*, the new language. Krashen and Terrell suggest that topics work best if they are familiar to students (p. 67-71) with the caveat that

Instructors who discuss totally unfamiliar topics, people, or places, place a huge burden on the student trying to cope with comprehending messages in a new language (p. 99).

Yet even well-selected topics do not ensure that interaction will take place in the classroom. Topics do not tell the teacher what to do. Gerngross, in fact, suggests that the *textbook*, not the syllabus, is "the crucial factor influencing what goes on in the classroom" (p. 90).

#### MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES

In the work-a-day situation, most teachers have neither time nor training to prepare all the materials required by a syllabus, regardless of syllabus quality. In fact, what teachers need is a set of ordered materials that instruct them in the use of resources, management of activities, and implementation of tasks. Most of this instruction could be built into students' materials. Some, such as providing massive input in the first weeks with beginners, may best be presented in materials especially for teachers. Materials, activities, resources, tasks, etc. are usually grouped together as defining methodology. Here, indeed, was a major advantage to the Audio-Lingual Method: it provided clear instructions to teachers about managing class time. Any explicit method shares this advantage with the complementary disadvantage that a limited routine of activities quickly becomes boring for student and teacher alike.

Communicative language teaching does not specify a particular method and so can

not rely on a small number of techniques to fill class time. In fact, a small collection of repeated activities would likely be contrary to the spirit of the approach, since it would tend to kill real interaction. Yet what happens in the classroom is the crucial determinant of a course's success. Communicative interaction is not simply learned as content, but must be lived as experience. If syllabus designers are to influence the quality of communicative courses, their influence must be at the methodological levels of techniques, materials, activities, tasks, etc. It is simply unfair to expect a working teacher to keep up with what is becoming a vast field of ideas and to take nearly full responsibility for hundreds of hours of classroom interaction. In the absence of adequate materials, the teacher's only option is to teach language as object (in this case probably language as grammar) or to simply follow a textbook for much of class time.

Course designers should therefore place primary emphasis on the design of classroom tasks (detailing appropriate materials, procedures, and techniques) in order to create richly interactive events in the classroom. This is especially true for the vast majority of non-specialist courses where teachers and pupils have very different attitudes toward language, where students do not "derive great pleasure from the learning and use of conscious rules" (Krashen, p. 187). Even those teachers who aim for communicative interaction in their classrooms will be frustrated if they are not supplied with the methodological means for achieving it.

EFL specialists have developed the "task" as a central concept in the creation of interactive events in the classroom. For beginning levels, Krashen and Terrell outline "pre-speech activities" (p. 75-78), Asher has developed his TPR method, and Gattegno has designed a "silent way". For more advanced levels, Ur suggests a range of activities to complement information gap and other techniques that have appeared in the last decade or so. Candlin, working at a theoretical level, has suggested a way of defining "task" in a language learning context:

One of a set of sequencable [sic], differentiable and problem-posing activities which involve learners in some self-reliant selection among a range of variable available cognitive and communicative strategies applied to existing or acquired knowledge in the exploration and attainment of a variety of pre-specified or emergent goals via a range of procedures, desirably interdependent with other learners in some social milieu.

Despite the imposing form of Candlin's definition, a vast, though disparate, array of task-based activities already exists. Unfortunately, no single author has gathered and systematized all the types available or necessary. Virtually no textbook offers more than a meagre handful among tons of language-descriptive pages.

A simple cookbook of interactive activities has not yet and probably never will be written. Yet theoretical and practical literature is full of useful examples and suggestions. We have long recognized informally that what happens in the classroom is what determines the quality of language acquisition. These critical classroom events have most often been attributed to the teacher's charisma, or lack of it, and the issue left at that. Yet now, with the perspective of a task-oriented syllabus, materials designers and syllabus writers have their toe in the door of the classroom. Well-designed language-learning tasks could offer the teacher an invaluable set of resources for setting up truly interactive events and therefore a rich, complete form of language practice.

An increased concern for activities in the classroom does not require abandoning syllabus content altogether. Rather, content development should depend on what is possible and desirable in fully exploiting the human and material resources of the classroom. A recursive model for the design process is likely to be more responsive to a complex relationship between content and activities. The measure of activity success will not be appropriacy to a pre-determined list of content, but instead the reaction and interest that the activity generates in the classroom. Appendix 2 sketches a possible model for the syllabus design process, one which may make it easier to keep the content from overwhelming and determining the teaching/learning process of interaction, without ignoring the obvious administrative advantages of specifying the areas of language that students will be exposed to and practice. The model assumes the exclusive use of the target language (except for perhaps a few minutes of native language questions and answers at the end of class). It further assumes a non-threatening atmosphere, especially at zero-level, and a substantial pre-speech, in-take period of practice preceding productive practice. Furthermore, the sole concern at zero-level is with acquisition behavior and not monitoring, so error correction and explicit explanation will be only gradually worked in. A needs assessment should, ideally, precede the first step in the model, setting objectives, in those courses where it is both possible and necessary to assess needs. Since in the majority of cases it is neither possible nor necessary to determine needs, this step is left out of the model.

The first step in the model, then, is setting very general objectives in behavioral terms (not in terms of knowledge). In those courses that have the most vague and imprecise goals (for instance, required high school or university courses), any set of interesting, interactive activities, presented in a non-threatening environment, will provide students with enough pleasant experience in the target language that they will continue afterwards to use and improve in the language, if and when they want to or can. It will not provide students with native-speaker pronunciation, flawless grammar, or the ability to write great literature. But what required course does? At more advanced levels and for more specialized purposes, the course goals will be easier to set and more exact, determining more precisely the types of interaction and tasks for students to engage in, for instance, "writing argumentative expository prose."

After setting very general objectives, designers consider tasks and activity types that seem useful in meeting the objectives. This step will, of course, require extensive review of the literature of the past five to ten years. With an approximate sense of course direction (objectives and activities), it should be possible to draw up a broad view of the content, topics, and sequence of class units. Content may be primarily nets of lexical items and in any case should specify what language will be presented for acquisition by the students and not the language to be learned by students.

With an overall sense of objectives, activities, and content, it should be possible to make the objectives more precise in light of activity types, content, and topics. This will also help ensure that students are tested on what they actually study and not on what teachers wish they could study. A general objective such as "maintain a conversation on a specific topic" may be specified to "maintain a conversation about their daily routine." It will *not* be possible to specify the approximation to native speaker proficiency.

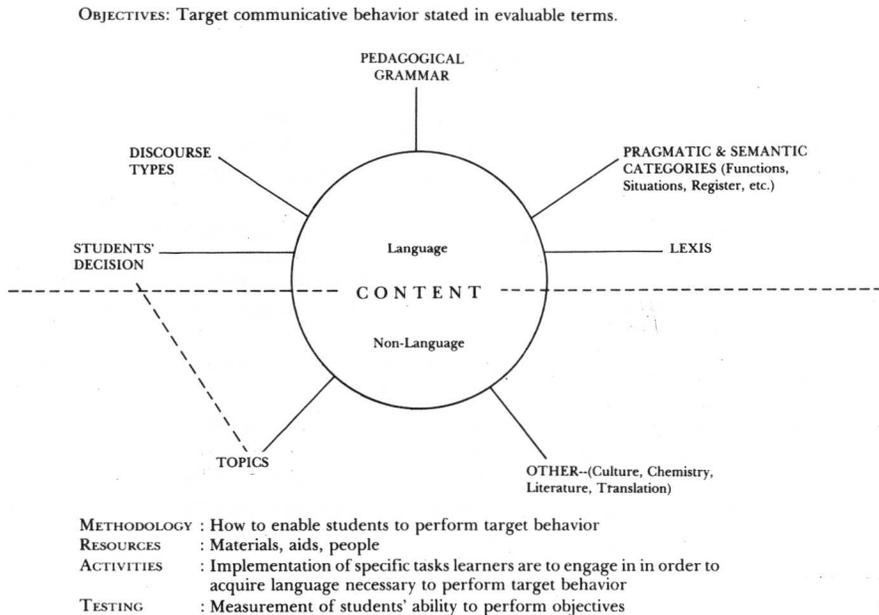
At this point specific materials and activities can be designed based on their

immediate relevance to the target population. The success of materials will depend largely on their inherent interest for students and the link they form between students prior knowledge and experience and the target language. Activities should be interesting enough that students would be motivated to do them even if they did not take place in the classroom. Of course, activities should create some form of communicative interaction in class and afford adequate amounts of input in the area of language being acquired. Allowances should be made for relaxing exercises, creation of environment, etc. It may be necessary to re-work objectives or content in light of activity design. Material will be tentative until it has been tested in the classroom situation. There should be an emphasis on “process” materials, in Michael Breen’s terms, which specify how language is to be used. This is especially important in guiding the teacher.

Finally, the content can be specified to the degree required by the administrative function. The content will not be able to specify which structures the student can manipulate without error, but it will be able to specify what topical and information areas students have had target language experience in. The general level of student achievement should be about the same, except in those courses that require extensive training in monitor use. There will be student-to-student variation, however, in what aspects of language have been acquired.

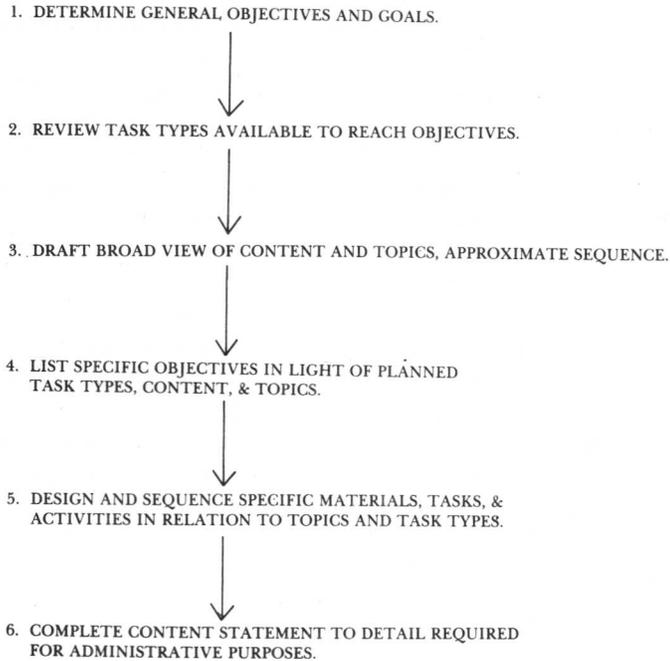
This design model will not lead to the scientific-looking content specification of a grammatical syllabus or even of a functional syllabus that specifies “realizations” for students to memorize. It could, on the other hand, avoid the problems of excessive over-monitoring (inhibiting self-correction), equalize class achievement, and provide real experience in the target language. Most important, it limits the dominance of course content, as a list of language items to be learned, and ties it into the actual activities that take place in the classroom.

## APPENDIX 1 SYLLABUS DESIGN



APPENDIX 2  
AN EXPERIMENTAL MODEL FOR  
SYLLABUS DESIGN

A GENERAL CONSIDERATION: Allow for student-to-student variation as to what is acquired and what is learned, increasing emphasis on efficient monitoring for more advanced or specialized classes.



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