THREE APPROACHES TO TASK-BASED SYLLABUS DESIGN

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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, Type A syllabuses. While each is relevant for analyses of the target language and its use, native-like linguistic elements find little support as meaningful acquisition units from a language learner's perspective. Task has more recently appeared as the unit of analysis in three analytic, (primarily) Type B alternatives: *procedural*, *process* and *task* syllabuses. Each of these has certain limitations, too, but when the task syllabus is combined with a *focus on form* in Task-Based Language Teaching, the task receives more support in SLA research as a viable unit around which to organize language teaching and learning opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

THREE NEW, TASK-BASED SYLLABUS TYPES appeared in the 1980's: (1) the procedural syllabus, (2) the process syllabus, and (3) the task syllabus. They are distinguishable from most earlier syllabus types by the fact that part of their rationale derives from what is known about human learning in general and/or second language learning in particular, rather than, as is the case with lexical, structural, notional, functional and relational syllabuses, primarily from an analysis of language or language use. In addition, while differing from one another in important ways, all three reject linguistic elements (such as word, structure, notion or function) as the unit of analysis and opt instead for some conception of *task*. Despite their considerable potential, they are not yet well known outside specialist circles, and perhaps for that reason have not received the testing and investigation that they (along with older SL syllabus types) deserve. In this paper we present and contrast these three approaches to task-

based syllabus design, and argue that the third approach, the task syllabus employed in task-based language teaching (TBLT), in particular, holds special promise.

MACRO OPTIONS IN SYLLABUS DESIGN

SYLLABUS TYPES CAN BE DIVIDED into two superordinate classes, synthetic and analytic (Wilkins, 1974, 1976), although it may be more accurate to view synthetic and analytic as two points on a continuum rather than as a strict dichotomy (Wilkins, 1976, pp. 1–2). *Synthetic* syllabuses segment the target language into discrete linguistic items for presentation one at a time:

> 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, p. 2)

'Synthetic', that is, 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 his learning task easier. (Wilkins, *ibid.*)

The synthetic syllabus relies on learners' assumed ability to learn a language in parts (e.g. structures and functions) which are independent of one another, and also to integrate, or synthesize, the pieces when the time comes to use them for communicative purposes. Lexical, structural, notional and functional syllabuses are synthetic. Although they need not be, so also are most so-called topical and situational syllabuses, for examination of teaching materials shows that topics and situations have traditionally been used as vehicles for structural syllabuses (Long and Crookes, to appear) — a tendency which has also begun to occur with some commercially published materials that purport to be task-based, but are not.

Analytic syllabuses offer the learner target language samples which, while they may have been modified in other ways (see below), have not been controlled for structure or lexis in the traditional manner. Users maintain that

> 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 organised 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, p. 13)

'Analytic', that is, again refers not to what the syllabus designer does, but to the operations required of the learner. Wilkins writes (1976, p. 14):

> since we are inviting the learner, directly or indirectly, to recognize the linguistic components of the language behavior he is acquiring, we are in effect basing our approach on the learner's analytic capabilities.

Updating Wilkins' definition a little, analytic syllabuses are those which 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' assumed ability to perceive regularities in the input and to induce rules (or to form new neural networks underlying what looks like rule-governed behavior), 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 all examples of the analytic syllabus type. Wilkins (1976, p. 2) classifies situational, notional and functional syllabuses as analytic. Notions and functions are clearly linguistic units, however, isolation of which in practice always results in a synthetic syllabus, such that exercises practising requests or apologies replace exercises on relative clauses or the present perfect.

The analytic/synthetic distinction is partially reflected in a second classification, White's (1988) Type A and Type B syllabuses. However, whereas Wilkins' categories turn on differences in the way input and learner interact,

White's conceptualization is broader, capturing differences in two general approaches to course design, instruction, language learning, and evaluation.

Type A syllabuses 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 or of how languages are learned. Type A syllabuses, White points out, are thus external to the learner, other-directed, determined by authority, set the teacher as decision-maker, treat the subject-matter of instruction as important, and assess success and failure in terms of achievement or mastery.

Type B syllabuses, on the other hand, focus on *how* the language is to be learned. They are non-interventionist. They involve no artificial preselection 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 thus internal to the learner, negotiated between learners and teacher as joint decision-makers, emphasize the process of learning rather than the subject matter, and assess accomplishment in relationship to learners' criteria for success.

As will become clear, in addition to being analytic, all three task-based syllabus types focused on in this paper are primarily Type B in nature, in that each allows both language and task to be negotiated in the classroom. Procedural and task syllabuses do have one Type A characteristic, however, for (via different procedures) each makes an initial specification in substantive terms of the kinds of tasks learners will work on before teachers and students ever meet. That is to say, they specify the *target tasks* learners ultimately need to be able to handle, and then allow the tasks teachers and learners work on in the classroom, i.e. the *pedagogic tasks*, to be negotiated (in ways described below). Process syllabuses, conversely, are Type B thoroughbreds; they allow negotiation of language and task, and, in theory, at least, place no constraints on the tasks chosen.

UNITS OF ANALYSIS : THE CASE FOR TASK

EVERY SYLLABUS NEEDS SOME UNIT around which to organise lessons and teaching materials. A case for task as the unit of analysis may be made on the basis of the problems with potential alternatives and/or on the merits of task itself. In this section, we will briefly consider the problems with word, structure, notion, function, topic and situation. Since the rationale for task, as well as its definition, varies among advocates of procedural, process and task syllabuses, we will postpone consideration of the merits (and problems) until we examine the three task-based approaches themselves.

Syllabus designers who choose a linguistic element — word, structure, notion or function — as the organizational unit simultaneously commit to a synthetic, type A syllabus. They sometimes attempt to disguise the underlying focus on isolated linguistic forms by avoiding overt drills in the teaching materials that embody the syllabus, and instead, while ostensibly dealing with a topic, situation or, most recently, task, seed dialogs and texts with the linguistic item of the day. This approach is notorious, however, for producing stilted samples of the target language — artificial because they are written to conform to a set of linguistic specifications (e.g. a 600-word vocabulary and two verb tenses) supposedly defining "levels of proficiency", and so do not reflect how people speak or write (much less learn) the language concerned (see Long and Crookes, to appear). Variants of this position include advocacy of tasks as carriers, or classroom practice devices, for traditional syllabus items (Nunan, 1989, p. 19), and the use of pedagogic tasks that are either likely or guaranteed to elicit particular structures (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1990).

Beyond the lack of authenticity, synthetic, Type A syllabuses are flawed because they assume a model of language acquisition unsupported by research findings on language learning in or out of classrooms. Where morpho-syntax is concerned, research shows that people do not learn isolated items in the L2 one at a time, in additive, linear fashion, but as parts of complex mappings of groups of form-function relationships. Nor could languages be learned in that way in principle, given that many items share a symbiotic relationship: learning English negation, for example, entails knowing something about word order,

auxiliaries and how to mark verbs for time, person and number. Progress in one area depends on progress in the others.

Synthetic syllabuses not only present linguistic forms separately, but also attempt to elicit immediate target-like mastery of those forms. Where syntax is concerned, research has demonstrated that learners rarely, if ever, move from zero to target-like mastery of new items in one step. Both naturalistic and classroom learners pass through 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-like forms. (See, e.g. Meisel, Clahsen & Pienemann, 1981; Huebner, 1983; Johnston, 1985; Sato, 1990; and for review, Hatch, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991.) As indicated, the sequences seem to be impervious to instruction, presumably because linguistic items have to be comprehensible and processable before they are learnable, and hence, teachable (Pienemann, 1984, 1987).

Morphological development reveals similar patterns. When plural *s*, articles, third person singular *s* and other morphemes first appear, they tend to do so variably and on certain words or word classes first (e.g. plural *s* on measure words, like *dollars* and *days*); they are not suddenly supplied correctly across all appropriate nouns and verbs — again despite teachers' and textbook writers' best instructional efforts (Lightbown, 1983; Pica, 1983). Progress is often not even unidirectional. SLA frequently involves temporary "deterioration" in learner performance (so-called "backsliding"), giving rise to U-shaped and zigzag developmental curves. (See, e.g. Huebner, 1983; Kellerman, 1985; Young, 1988; Sato, 1990).

All synthetic syllabuses, not just structurally based ones, are flawed in these ways. Studies of interlanguage development provide no more support for the idea that learners acquire one notion or function at a time than for the idea that they master one word or structure at a time. As Prabhu (1984, p. 273) noted:

(T)here are...methodological consequences — resulting at least in a difference of emphasis — to adopting a structural or a functional syllabus, but both kinds of syllabus have the fundamental similarity

that they look on language acquisition as a planned process of input-assimilation. They both rely on the validity of the equation: what is taught = what is (or ought to be) learnt.

The point is moot, however, since it is the linguistic exponents of notions and functions, i.e. structures, lexical items, intonation patterns and so on, that the learner actually encounters in the input, not the notions and 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 consist of isolated native-like structures (e.g. 'Would you mind + gerund, please?' as a polite request) — structures which are no more plausible as acquisition units for having their potential communicative function made more salient.

If any target-like linguistic items *are* learnable separately and completely at one time, words or collocations may be the most likely candidates. It seems more reasonable to suppose a learner can connect items like *car* and *book*, *put on* and *take off*, with their referents accurately and invariably from time 1, and do so on demand, not when dictated by some internal syllabus, especially if the lexical item marks a one-to-one form-meaning relationship. This belief, coupled with advances in text corpus analytic techniques, has stimulated renewed interest in the viability of words and collocations as units of analysis in syllabus design (Sinclair, 1987; Sinclair & Renouf, 1988; Kennedy, 1987, 1990a, 1990b). Where syllabus design is concerned, however, problems of authenticity and learnability once again limit the potential of this effort.

The authenticity problem arises from the fact that lexical, collocational or structural frequency counts provide useful information on the relative frequency of occurrence of items in large corpora (often of several million running words), but not on the occurrence of those items in individual texts. Therefore, if writers incorporate authentic examples from the data-based survey of native speaker use underlying the linguistic description, teaching materials based on a lexical syllabus may be expected to improve on previous work in the way the use of particular vocabulary items and collocations is

illustrated (see, e.g. Willis and Willis, 1988). As with structural and notional-functional syllabuses, however, the materials are also likely to expose the learner to non-authentic samples of the target language overall if whole dialogs or passages are written to conform to word frequency data, given that while people demonstrably use (say) six hundred words and collocations more frequently than others, it is unlikely that any single stretch of authentic discourse will happen to be lexically graded in this way. The benefits of the data-based computational work can be preserved and the problem avoided if the data on use is accessed to guide the presentation of individual items when a brief focus on form is judged appropriate, but frequency data ignored in writing texts. That means, however, that the word is abandoned as the unit of analysis and an alternative is required.

The learnability problems for lexical syllabuses are the same as those for any syllabus using linguistic elements and target-like models as the organizational units. While some instantaneous vocabulary acquisition probably does occur, normal developmental processes operate here as elsewhere (Blum & Levenston, 1973), especially when first and second language form-meaning relationships differ in a semantic domain or when non-concrete referents are involved. Vocabulary and collocation errors abound, often persisting in advanced learners long after most grammatical problems have been cleared up (Hyltenstam, 1988; Patkowski, 1990). As with so many grammatical forms, learners alternate correct use of words with non-native-like use for long periods. That is, they can quickly learn new lexical *forms*, but need time to understand their precise meaning(s) and selectional restrictions, i.e. their *use*. (For data and review, see Kellerman, 1984; Gass, 1989.)

The last two ostensive units of analysis in synthetic syllabuses are topic and situation. While each is frequently highlighted as a source of chapter headings in teaching materials, examination shows that both units have to date served merely as carriers of linguistic items, typically lexical and structural, respectively (for details, see Long and Crookes, to appear). The arguments against them as synthetic units, therefore, are the same as those against overtly linguistically based syllabuses and materials, and need not be repeated.

In sum, whatever the unit of analysis — structure, notion, function, word, topic or situation — synthetic syllabuses suffer from some generic problems, most obviously their 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 word, structure, notion and function, or covert, as with situation and topic. Further, the analysis is conducted on an idealized native speaker version of that language. SLA research offers no evidence to suggest that native-like exemplars of 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. The same literature provides overwhelming evidence against all of those assumptions, in fact.

SLA is sufficiently problematic 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 analysing 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.

TASK AND THREE TYPES OF TASK-BASED SYLLABUS

Precursors to task-based syllabuses

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, 1984). Not surprisingly, therefore, classroom implementation was initially small scale and the result of individual effort and imagination (Allwright, 1976; Dakin, 1973; Newmark, 1971), with one larger institutionalised ("communicative" rather than truly task-based) project,

the Malaysian Language Syllabus (Kementarian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1975; see Rodgers, 1984; Samah, 1984; Long & Crookes, to appear). It is only recently that some more substantial attempts to use analytic syllabuses have appeared, each using task as the unit of analysis.

Procedural syllabuses

The procedural syllabus is associated with the work in India from 1979–1984 of Prabhu, Ramani and others on the Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1980, 1984, 1987). Early influences were similar to those of the Malaysian communicative syllabus, 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, p. 164)

Prabhu (1987) denies the sufficiency of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), but he supports the idea that students need plenty of opportunity to develop their comprehension abilities before any production is demanded of them. He recognises that acquisition of a linguistic structure is not "an instant, one-step procedure", and claims (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, p. 70). This places him firmly in the analytic camp:

> any attempt to guide [learning] 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 no 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, pp. 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, p. 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 describes vaguely as "to let the language relevant to it come into play" (1984, p. 276). 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, p. 55–7). Opinion-gap, and later, information-gap and (especially) reasoning-gap activities were favored in the Bangalore project (for discussion, see Prabhu, 1987, pp. 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, p. 277)

The examples of tasks Prahbu provides are of the kind familiar in the many variants of so-called "communicative language teaching" (CLT), which is not `task-based' in the analytic sense. They include calculating distances and planning itineraries using maps and charts, assessing applicants for a job on the basis of biographical sketches, completing `whodunit' stories, and answering comprehension questions about dialogs. These are not necessarily activities students will ever need to do or do in English outside the classroom (although they may be useful for language learning). Similarly, activities in a procedural syllabus are pre-set *pedagogic tasks*, not related to a set of *target tasks* determined by an analysis of a particular group of learners' future needs.

In theory, at least, 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 (for discussion, see Beretta, 1989; Prabhu, 1990). 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, pp. 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, p. 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 and Terrell, 1983).

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 criticised on a variety of grounds, one of the chief complaints being its failure to build an evaluation component into the design (a criticism rarely made of programs using synthetic syllabuses). More important than any shortcomings in the way this particular program was

implemented, however, is whether or not procedural syllabuses as advocated by Prabhu are *in principle* well motivated.

There appear to us to be at least three problems with the procedural syllabus as currently conceived.

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. It is impossible for anyone to verify the appropriacy 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 `fifty percent 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. 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, 1990).

3. There are logical arguments having to do with the need for negative evidence and *in*comprehensible input in SLA (see, e.g. Bley-Vroman, 1986; White, 1987), and empirical findings on instructed interlanguage development (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, 1987; Candlin, 1984, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987). The early rationale for process syllabuses was educational and philosophical, not primarily 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, pp. 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 learners 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 of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu. (Candlin, 1987, p. 10)

Breen and 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 reinterpretation by teachers and learners in the classroom. Candlin (1984) suggests that what a syllabus 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, which in turn drives learning:

> 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, p. 56)

Breen (1984) (see also, Widdowson, 1985) 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. He advocates 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, p. 52)

The process syllabus is a plan for incorporating the negotiation process, and thereby, learning processes, into syllabus design. Breen (1984) proposes a hierarchical model, with 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 (Breen, Candlin and Waters, 1979), and (4) alternative tasks, i.e. a bank of pedagogic tasks students may select from to realise the 'activities':

> (I)t is at the level of tasks that the actual working process of the classroom group is realized in terms of what is overtly done from moment to moment within the classroom. (Examples at task level would include such things as agreeing a definition of a problem,

organizing data, deducing a particular rule or pattern, discussing reactions, etc.) (Breen, 1984, p. 56)

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, 1987, p. 23)

Published criticisms of the process syllabus (see, e.g. 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 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; Arnove, 1986; Vilas, 1986), as well as 200 years of

successful libertarian education (see, e.g. Holt, 1972; Illich, 1971; Spring, 1975; Avrich, 1980; 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. Breen and Candlin advocate making the range, criteria and parameters of choice known to teachers and learners, but are keen to preserve flexibility to allow for learners and circumstances changing. We recognise that prespecification of syllabus content is precisely what Breen and Candlin seek to avoid, and accept that prespecification in most syllabuses and the commercially published materials that embody them suffer 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 recognise 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, we believe course designers should be better judges of whether, and 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 this. Pre-selecting pedagogic tasks on the basis of pre-identified target tasks need not mean that learner choices in other areas 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. While we recognise that learners are *one* important source of knowledge about their needs, we believe that a properly conducted needs identification makes course designers better at diagnosing those needs (as opposed to wants) than learners alone. We also recognize,

however, following Brindley (1989), that learners' needs are broad and can change during a course.

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, for useful discussion of these issues), but a problem for the process syllabus (and all task-based syllabuses), nonetheless.

3. While not ruled out and presumably an option with task design for the process syllabus, no explicit provision is made for a focus on language form. For the reasons indicated above in our critique of procedural syllabuses, we think this is an error.

4. It is not clear to what (if any) theory or research in SLA the process syllabus is to be held accountable. 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 strong evidence for at least some uniqueness for language knowledge and acquisition, and given the range of theories developed to account for it, it is difficult fully to evaluate proposals which are not obviously and explicitly psycholinguistically motivated.

Task-Based Language Teaching.

A third approach to course design which takes task as the unit of analysis is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Long, 1985, 1989, to appear; Crookes, 1986; Crookes and Long, 1987; Long and Crookes, 1987, to appear). TBLT bases arguments for an analytic, chiefly Type B, syllabus on what is known about the processes involved in second language learning (see, e.g. Hatch, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Spolsky, 1989; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991), on the findings of second language classroom research (see, e.g. 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 and Mountford, 1978;

Selinker, Tarone and Hanzeli, 1981; Swales, 1985, 1990; Tickoo, 1988; Widdowson, 1979).

The basic rationale for TBLT derives from SLA research, particularly descriptive and experimental studies comparing tutored and naturalistic learning. Results suggest that formal instruction (1) has no effect on developmental sequences, (2) has a positive 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 improves rate of learning, and (4) probably improves the ultimate level of SL attainment (Long, 1988; Doughty, in press). These advantages for instruction cannot be explained as the result of classroom 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, awareness of certain classes of linguistic items in the input is necessary for learning to occur, and drawing learners' attention to those items facilitates development when certain conditions are met (Schmidt, 1990a, 1990b, in press).

To illustrate, the following are five examples of how a focus on form can help SLA. Work on marked or more marked L2 forms can transfer to implied unmarked or less marked items (Eckman, Bell and 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, which appears to be necessary if input is to become intake (Schmidt, in press; Schmidt and Frota, 1986). Increased planning can promote use of more complex language and, possibly, of developmentally more advanced interlingual forms (Crookes, 1989). Instruction targeted at an appropriate level speeds up passage through a developmental sequence and extends the scope of application of a new rule (Pienemann and Johnson, 1987). Two kinds of negative evidence, overt feedback on error targeted at an appropriate level, and *in*comprehensible input, may help destabilize an incorrect rule and can even be essential for this to happen, as in cases where the L2 is more restrictive in a given linguistic domain. 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, either may be communicatively successful with L2 speakers, with the result that the untutored learner may not receive negative input (because the error never causes a breakdown in communication) and so never realise that the form is ungrammatical (White, 1989).

The evidence of positive effects for instruction does not 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, notably the evidence from SLA research of the need to respect "learner syllabuses", and the related evidence against full native speaker target code forms as viable acquisition units, at the very least where beginners are concerned.

On the other hand, the evidence does motivate a *focus on form* (Long, in press), that is, use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw students' attention to aspects of the target language code. Learner production, both grammatical and ungrammatical, is one source of cues for teachers as to when this will be (un)productive; interlanguage-sensitive diagnostic testing (e.g. Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley, 1988) is another. Which aspects of the language, when, how, and for which learners, all need to be precisely specified (for details, see Long, to appear).

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, and 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 are perceived by the learner as a result. The strengthening of the subset of those that are not destabilized by negative input, their increased accessibility and incorporation

in more complex associations within long-term memory, adds to the complexity of the grammar and constitutes SL development.

The definitions of (both target and pedagogic) task and task type used by Long and Crookes 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 they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists. (Long, 1985, p. 89)

Similarly, Crookes regards 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, p. 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, etc. Valuable expertise in procedures for conducting such needs analyses was accumulated by ESP specialists in the 1970's and 1980's (see, e.g. Candlin, Bruton and Leather, 1976; Jupp and Hodlin, 1975; Mackay, 1978; Selinker, 1979; Berwick, 1989; Brindley, 1989), and can still be drawn upon, even though most early ESP program designers were working within a notional-functional framework. Bell (1981, 159–170) describes a task-based needs identification for a canteen assistant (based on Boydell, 1970), as well as the way the resulting information can be used for diagnostic and (in

Bell's case, notional-functional) syllabus design purposes. Swales (1990) offers examples and insightful discussion from the design of a university English for academic purposes program. Yalden (1987, pp. 121–128) 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.

Once target tasks have been identified via the needs analysis, the next step is to classify them into (target) *task types*. For example, in a course for trainee flight attendants, serving breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks and refreshments, might be classified as serving food and beverages. *Pedagogic tasks* are then derived from the task types and sequenced to form the *task-based syllabus* (for a rationale and details of these procedures, see Long, 1985, to appear). It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom. They will be increasingly complex approximations to the target tasks which motivated their inclusion. 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, the amount and kind of language required, the number of sources competing for attention, and other aspects of the intellectual challenge a pedagogic task poses are just a few of the potential grading and sequencing criteria that have been proposed (for discussion, see Brown, 1989; Brown and Yule, 1983; Crookes, 1986; Long, 1985, to appear; Robinson, 1990).

The grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks is also partly a function of which of various pedagogic options are selected to accompany their use. It is here that some of the 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 over the past 15 years are most helpful. Useful information is available from that work on several relevant issues, including, but not only, the effects on student comprehension of elaboratively, or interactionally, modified spoken and written discourse (for review, see Parker and 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 and Pica,

1986; Bygate, 1988; Long and Porter, 1985); and relationships between different pedagogic task types (one-way and two-way, planned and unplanned, open and closed, here-and-now and there-and-then), on the one hand, and negotiation work and interlanguage destabilization, on the other (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Berwick, 1988; Crookes and Rulon, 1988; Pica, 1987a; Pica, Holliday, Lewis and Morgenthaler, 1989; Robinson, 1990; and for review, Crookes, 1986; Pica, 1987b; Long, 1989).

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 criterion, as established by experts in the field, not their ability to complete discrete-point grammar items. While beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that developments in criterion-referenced language testing in the past 15 years (see, e.g. Brown, 1989a, 1989b; Brindley, 1989) hold great promise for language teaching in general and for TBLT in particular.

TBLT is distinguished by its compatibility with research findings on language learning, a principled approach to content selection, and an attempt to incorporate findings from classroom-centered research when making decisions concerning the design of materials and methodology. However, it is not without problems of its own, of which the following are some of which we are aware. There are no doubt others.

1. We have outlined what we hope is a coherent rationale, however sketchy, for TBLT. Its research base is, as yet, limited, and some of the second language acquisition and classroom research findings referred to may bear alternative interpretations, given the recency, 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 are more problematic. Little empirical support is yet available for the various proposed parameters of task classification and difficulty, nor has much of an effort been made to define some of them in operational terms (but see Brown, 1989). Identification of valid, user-friendly sequencing criteria remains one of the oldest unsolved

problems in language teaching of all kinds (for useful discussion, see Widdowson, 1968, pp. 134–144; Schinnerer-Erben, 1981).

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 criticised topic and situation for their vagueness and for the tendency for examples of each to overlap, so it must be recognised 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 the fare, choosing purchases, paying for purchases, and so on, and some of those "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, or 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. A few programs have been reported that reflect some principles of TBLT (e.g. Early, Mohan & Hooper, 1989; Yalden, 1987), and classroom studies have been conducted of several issues in such programs (e.g. Chaudry, 1990; Rankin, 1990; Long, to appear), but no complete program has been implemented and subjected to the kind of rigorous, controlled evaluation we think essential.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

ADVOCATES OF PROCESS SYLLABUSES, procedural syllabuses and TBLT differ in the rationale 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 several issues, including testing and evaluation.

All three proposals have some areas of agreement, however, most fundamentally their rejection of synthetic, Type A, 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, at least in the US, where funding continues to be allocated to personnel "training", but not to research on foreign and second language acquisition and language teaching.

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