Principles of Syllabus Organization

Session 5
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Most syllabuses organize their content on the basis of our main principles (Breen: 1987: 83)

- Focus
- Select
- Subdivide
- Sequence
Focus

- A certain aspect or area of the target language will be emphasised or focused upon in the syllabus.
- One syllabus, for example, might focus on linguistic system (grammar, lexis, phonology).
- Another syllabus might focus on the uses or purposes for which we learn the target language.
- Another might focus on the language skills needed in the target language.
## Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Focus</th>
<th>Category of Content</th>
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<tr>
<td>1- Linguistic</td>
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<td>2- Socio-Linguistic</td>
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</tbody>
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What the syllabus designer focuses on initially tends to reveal his/her view of language.
Select

- Selection is the process of limiting as the whole of the target language is not teachable.
- If, for example, the area of focus is grammar, then some selection has to be made and particular aspects of grammar will be decided on, e.g., the tense system, the modals, the noun phrase, etc.
Select

• Criteria used in the selection process include the following:
  • Learner need
  • Learner interest
  • Frequency of occurrence
  • Teachability
  • Classroom use
  • Degree to which items cohere as a system (systematizability).
Subdivide

- This involves breaking down selected aspects into smaller and more manageable units or items.
- For example, if the area of focus is language use, this might be broken down into a list of situations, a list of the functions which might be predicted in those situations and the types of discourse in which learners will participate e.g. conversation, interview, etc.
- e.g. At the post office
  - Ask for information
  - Request help or information etc.
Subdivide

- Subdividing also involves what is called staging (Halliday et al: 1964). This involves the following:
  - Division of content into time segments- items are arranged in blocks, e.g., terms, years, etc.
  - Ensuring that items are properly distributed over the total period of time allowed for learning programmes.
  - Decisions about when to introduce items/skills, e.g., speaking and listening first and then reading or writing? Which items can be introduced simultaneously?
  - Decisions about when certain standards or levels should have been achieved.
Sequence

- This involves making decisions about the order in which items should come. What comes before what?
- Should, for example, the first and second person pronouns be taught before the third person pronouns? Should the present continuous be taught before the present simple?
Sequence: linear, cyclical or spiral

- As Pitt Corder points out, items listed in a syllabus suggests a linear progression. This does not reflect the way language is organized, where no aspect or item is either totally dependent or independent of another item, but is a network of interrelated parts.

- It also does not reflect the way learning takes place. This latter problem, however, can be overcome, to some extent, by using a cyclical or spiral syllabus structure where the syllabus keeps returning to items but in greater depth.

- Clearly the task of sequencing raises many questions about the process of language learning and tends to reflect the syllabus designers’ views on how people learn language.
Criteria used in selecting and sequencing content

- Brumfit (1985) claims that the principles for internal organization of content within a syllabus will be either:
  - Intrinsic
  - Extrinsic

- **Intrinsic**: relates to the extent to which items in a syllabus are elements of a system, e.g., the grammar system. If they are, then this allows the system to be presented in a structured way.

- **Extrinsic**: Extrinsic criteria are used to organise content which is not systematisable in the way described above. They are also used for motivational reasons in syllabuses where the content does have an internal cohesion, e.g., grammatical items in a structural syllabus.
Criteria used in sequencing content of Structural Syllabi

- **Contrastive Difficulty**: this suggests that there will be greater difficulty with those aspects of the L2 which are most different from L1, e.g., absence of articles in some languages.

- **Complexity of Form**: i.e. I have a computer vs I will have had this computer for 6 months.

- **Frequency of Occurrence**: i.e. the frequency with which a word/structure appears in a particular language sample, e.g., ‘a’, ‘the’ etc., are very frequent.

- **Range**: i.e. the number of samples or texts in which an item is found.
Criteria used in sequencing content of Structural Syllabi

- **Availability**: i.e. the most appropriate and necessary words for certain situations.

- **Coverage**: i.e. The degree to which a word can displace other words, e.g. ‘seat’ = chair, bench, stool.

- **Learnability**: what makes an item learnable. e.g., whether it can be easily demonstrated, whether it is similar to the mother-tongue, i.e. a cognate, etc.

- **Psycholinguistic Complexity**: e.g., third person ‘s’ morpheme. *He lives in Makkah.* Grammatically this item appears fairly simple. However, it proves very difficult for learners to master because the form of the verb is governed by the person and number of the noun in subject position. The learner according to Pienemann and Johnson (1985) has to hold this person and number in his/her memory and then produce the form of the verb. The difficulty is caused by constraints on the short term memory.

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Criteria used for sequencing content in semantic syllabi

- **Sequencing Potential (Johnson 1982):** Language functions are selected and sequenced in a way which reflects their potential to combine and form larger communicative interactions. E.g. Greetings and asking for information and farewells.

- **Predictability of Communicative Function:** i.e. Introduce first those functions like greetings which are most predictable.

- **Immediacy of Need:** i.e. Those functions for example which are required early on in the classroom, e.g. Instructions.

- **Complexity/Simplicity of form:** this has proved difficult to apply in practice as language associated with one language function is as simple or complex as that associated with any other.
Criteria used for sequencing content in semantic syllabi

- **Priority of Need**: i.e. one selects first those functions which a learner is likely to need early on, e.g., greetings, asking for information.

- **Utterance length**: i.e. select first the shorter exponent for a language function.

- **Transparency**: some ways of realizing language functions are more explicit/transparent than others. e.g., Would you open the window please? It’s very hot in here.

- **Generalizability/Coverage**: i.e. A particular function can be used in a number of different situations (e.g. Greetings, asking for and giving information, etc.). They are not restricted to a particular situation like e.g. Taking an oath.
General Comments

- There is a good deal of popular support for the view that the organization of content in syllabus facilitates learning. Most of the criteria mentioned, however, are not related to psychological principles of learning, e.g., frequency, utility, linguistic difficulty, etc. They are shown in many cases to have shaky foundations (Schinnerer-Erben: 1981). Nevertheless, they have been used regularly over the years and cannot be totally discounted (Gibbons: 1984).

- An alternative view mentioned by Schinnerer-Erben (1981) is that learners can organize and sequence the material for themselves, i.e., they follow their own natural internal order.

- However, organization can be involved in the feedback stage when the teacher helps the learners with problems detected in their performance. Feedback is based on what learners want or need to learn as reflected in their performance errors or difficulties they themselves have identified.
Psychological Criteria for Sequencing

- Although both Gibbons (1984) and Schinnerer-Erben (1981) concluded that studies of natural order in language acquisition (i.e. grammatical items appear to be acquired in a certain order) had limited relevance for second language syllabus design, findings by Pienemann (1985) throw more light on the subject.
- The findings suggest that syllabus designers may eventually be able to utilize some of the information to sequence grammatical items in a syllabus.
- However, Nunan (1988) suggests caution as the direct application of second language acquisition research to syllabus design is rather limited at present.
- Even if we do gain more information about the natural order in which items are acquired, we still do not know how items are processed internally. It is likely that it is a global rather than a linear process and attempting to sequence items for learning may interfere with the learning process. There would also be the additional problem that each learner would be at a different stage of development.
Multi-dimensional syllabuses

The organization of content in a syllabus is a complex matter and involves juggling various competing criteria. Where there is a conflict, a syllabus designer has to make decisions, but these must be principled decisions which are made explicit to teachers.

Given that in most modern syllabuses there will be various types of content, how will these be integrated?

Wilkins (1976) refers to the need for multi-dimensional syllabuses in which units would be specified according to a number of different strands, e.g., notions, functions, structures, skills, etc.

However, there are likely to be problems once you begin to sequence and you cannot sequence all strands simultaneously. Sequencing in one strand leads to disorganization in other strands.

One approach is to sequence one strand and then try and link or integrate other strands around it. Strategies (Abbs, B. & Fairburn, I. 1977) does this by using a story line to link the other elements around the functional strand.

Another approach is to focus on one strand and leave the other strands as lists to be used at the teachers’s discretion.