

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE BRAZILIAN
EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED SYLLABUS

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1. The communicative approach to language teaching

There has been great emphasis on the 'communicative approach' to language teaching (CALT) in the recent literature on foreign and second language teaching. The term 'communicative', however, has been applied to different areas of language teaching, namely, syllabus design, teaching materials and methodology. The distinction between the 'L' (linguistic, analytical and formal) and the 'P' (psychological and pedagogic) types of communicative approach (Stern, 1981) characterizes the two main areas involved in CALT.

The 'L' approach reflects the strong influence of ideas in the field of sociolinguistics which developed as a reaction against the limitations of the Chomskian notion of competence, which took no account of the social and cultural aspects involved in actual language use (Widdowson, 1978). In other words, the native speaker's competence was not to be described solely in terms of 'grammaticality' or 'linguistic acceptability' but also in terms of 'appropriateness' (suitability of a linguistic variety in a given social context). Language descriptions, then, incorporated concepts such as 'speech acts' (Austin, 1962), 'functional grammar' (Halliday, 1967, 1970, 1973) and 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1971).

Since descriptions of language usually serve as the basic 'raw material' for the design of teaching syllabuses, it has been in this area where the 'L' approach advocates have concentrated their efforts to give a communicative dimension to language teaching. As a result, several suggestions for the restructuring of the organization of syllabuses and materials have been made in the last decade.

The 'L' approach then, is analytical and linguistic-oriented insofar as it sees teaching as "leading students to forms of linguistic expression prescribed more or less specifically in advance by the syllabus" (Roberts, 1982: 10). Because

these forms are described with reference to some of the 'categories of language use' (Johnson, 1982) and not of linguistic competence, a rigorous specification of the learner's communicative needs has become essential for the organization of the syllabus.

It has been argued (Brumfit, 1979; Widdowson, 1979, 1981; Roberts, 1982) that the 'L' approach has failed to produce the expected results because it has been uncommitted on questions of methodology (the processes involved in the actual use of language) and therefore, it has had "little direct applicability to the work of a vast number of language teachers" (Ross, 1980: 14).

The 'P' approach, on the other hand, seems to have taken the opposite direction: it places much more emphasis upon the psychological and affective aspects of language teaching and, consequently, it has had important implications for language teaching methodology. The theoretical framework of this approach is based on recent developments in psycholinguistics, humanistic psychology, and learning theories in general.

While the 'L' approach is concerned with the specification of communicative (notional/functional) categories of language in the syllabus, the 'P' approach "processes methodological procedures that are quite revolutionary" (Johnson, 1982: 194) but makes no reference to questions on syllabus design.

The gap which apparently exists between methodology and syllabus design has been discussed in great detail by Brumfit (1978, 1979, 1981) and Widdowson (1979, 1981, 1982) who argue that the latter should not only involve considerations about the final product of learning, but also about the processes of learning, which are directly related to methodology. The traditional - but still current - idea behind syllabus design is to select among the 'total' of a language, the most useful items and organize these items according to certain criteria. In other words, syllabuses would deal exclusively with language teaching content at the expense of specifications of methods and classroom activities. The extent to which the so-called 'communicative syllabuses' have changed this tradition will be discussed below.

2. Communicative syllabuses

'Communicative syllabuses' is an umbrella term which incorporates several different types of syllabuses, namely, situational syllabus, thematic syllabus, operational syllabus and notional functional syllabus (Shaw, 1977). I shall restrict myself to the discussion of the notional/functional syllabus for it has attracted an enormous amount of attention and, therefore, has become the most popular representative or archetype of the communicative curricula.

The main characteristics of the functional/notional syllabus may be summarized as following:

- (1) The theoretical framework of the notional syllabus is based on recent developments in the area of sociolinguistics, semantics and philosophy of

language. The concept of 'language functions' has derived from the notion of 'speech acts' and 'illocutionary acts' (what you do by using language).

- (2) The notional syllabus has also come as a reaction against the limitations imposed by the structural syllabus. Wilkin's (1976) attack on the synthetic approaches to language teaching exemplifies this reaction.
- (3) The notional syllabus presupposes an attempt to develop some criteria for selecting the notions and functions which are likely to be particularly useful to the learner. After all, it would be impossible to include all the "possible notional and functional uses to which the foreign learner might wish - in all possible circumstances - to put the language he is learning" into use (Johnson, 1982: 90). In this case, it might be concluded that in order to adopt a purely notional approach to syllabus design, it would be necessary to specify in detail the language needs of the learners. The processes and procedures involved in this specification (or 'needs analysis') have been fully discussed by Munby (1978).

3. The adoption of a functional/notional syllabus in the Brazilian context.

As it was pointed out above, the notional syllabus presupposes a needs analysis, or a specification of the learner's communicative needs since its language content is based on notional and functional categories which are to be found in the language used in situations in which the students are likely to speak the target language.

This type of analysis would be unfeasible in the Brazilian context (particularly within the school system) since it would be difficult - not to say impossible - to predict all the possible situations where the students might need to use the English language. If one attempts to pre-specify these situations, one might end up with "an absurdly long list, quite impracticable for teaching purposes" (Johnson, 1982:40). This is not to say, however, that the need for English in Brazil is widespread and the use of the English language essential for communicative purposes in most social and economic spheres of society. Although the need for and use of English is still limited in quantitative terms, it is not restricted to predictable and limited areas of use.

Another problem in the teaching of English in Brazil, which would make the notional syllabus even more inappropriate for that context, is the short amount of time which is devoted to foreign language teaching in schools, particularly in state schools. Consequently, the contact which the students have with the target language is very little since they have very few opportunities to speak or listen to English outside school. In this case, systematicity (systematic exposure) would be an essential characteristic which any syllabus designed for Brazilian schools would have to incorporate. As it has been pointed out (Stern, 1969), the lack of a system may prevent retention if the learner does not have enough exposure to linguistic data or input.

The notional syllabus could not meet this requirement since its language material is not organized according to systematic formulations. Functions represent isolated units within a syllabus inventory and are not part of a system. Furthermore, a language function taught in a lesson may have nothing in common with a function taught in a previous or subsequent lesson. Functions do not have a "generative potential" (Brumfit, 1980) which seems to be a highly facilitative and therefore positive aspect in the language learning process, particularly in an E.F.P., as opposed to an E.S.L., situation as it is the case of Brazil.

In a functional/notional syllabus, the learner is also expected to "approximate his language more and more to the language uses characteristic of the community whose language he is acquiring" (Wilkins, 1976:23). Brumfit's (1979) allegation that the learner "is not usually aiming to become a member of that community, but merely to communicate with it" (p. 103) is perfectly applicable to the case of the Brazilian learner. Hence to develop a highly acute knowledge about the social and cultural aspects which might affect the learner's language behaviour would represent a far too ambitious and unrealistic objective in an English teaching programme for Brazilian secondary schools.

In summary, economy, systematicity, generative potential and realistic aims are elements which must characterize any syllabus which would be suitable for Brazilian schools. Since the notional/functional approach to syllabus design does not present those characteristics, we might conclude that its adoption for Brazilian schools in a large scale would be premature. This is not to suggest, however, that the notional syllabus could not be used as the basis of organization of ESP courses in Brazil. In those situations where the students' communicative needs can be clearly identified, a needs-based approach seems to be entirely suitable. As Widdowson (1979:12) puts it:

So long as our concern is with the teaching of 'general English' without any immediate purpose, without knowing in any definite way what kind of communicative requirements are to be made of it, then the need to teach language as communication is not particularly evident. Once we are confronted with the problem of teaching English for a special purpose, then we are immediately up against the problem of communication.

The doubts about the appropriateness of a functional/notional syllabus in the Brazilian context, which have been expressed here, can, to a large extent, be extended to the other types of communicative curricula mentioned above since the correlation between linguistic forms - which are economical and can be systematized - and the communicative items or features which form the basis of organization of those syllabuses (situations, themes, tasks) is not sufficiently systematic.

4. Problems in the design of an appropriate syllabus for the Brazilian context

In view of the problems and constraints imposed by the Brazilian educational and linguistic context (limited exposure to the target language, time allocated to English studies in the school curriculum, heterogenous areas of language use, to name just a few), it might be suggested that the only type of teaching curriculum which would be appropriate for Brazilian schools would be the grammatical/structural syllabus. However, the structural syllabus has always dominated in general language courses in Brazil, where pupils devote almost all their time to practising linguistic forms. But the result of all this emphasis on grammatical structures is that the vast majority of students who finish secondary school are totally unable to use English for any kind of communicative purpose.

The Brazilian teacher, therefore, would find himself in a dilemma when deciding upon the type of syllabus he is to adopt. On the one hand, if he follows a structural approach, his students might end up being linguistically competent but still unable to communicate. On the other hand, a purely communicative approach would not be appropriate for the Brazilian context for all the reasons discussed above.

This dilemma, however, seems to be more apparent than real. Firstly, each type of syllabus does not necessarily have to represent an alternative to the other since the dichotomy which would appear to exist between analytic and synthetic approaches is not as rigid as one might be led to believe. Secondly, one must bear in mind that successful language teaching is not solely dependent upon the type of syllabus which has been adopted. The role which methodology procedures play in language cannot be neglected or even underestimated.

Syllabus specifications, then, need not necessarily impose constraints which hamper explorations in methodology. The problems presented by the structural syllabus, for example, could be largely minimized by a principled communicative methodology. Thus, in the Brazilian context, it would appear to be perfectly possible, if not desirable, to introduce a communicative methodology into a structurally oriented course.

In actuality, however, one cannot expect most teachers in Brazil to teach a structural syllabus in a communicative way. For them, it is only natural to use classroom activities which focus on language structures when the syllabus (or textbook) they are following is organized on a structural basis. Furthermore, not many teachers in Brazil have had much opportunity to develop in their training courses an awareness of the communicative aspects of language use and a sensitivity in relation to the psychological factors which affect language learning.

In the case of TEFL in Brazil, where syllabus specifications usually dictate the type of activities used in the classroom, the only realistic way to ensure the teaching of a structural syllabus within a communicative dimension is to allow for a greater role for methodology in the design of the curriculum itself. In other words, there must be an attempt to specify in the syllabus methods and

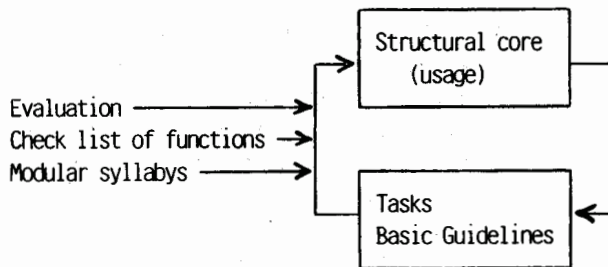
classroom activities which could not only be compatible with the linguistic orientation of the syllabus, but also ensure that the language material to be taught will be put into use in an effective way.

5. An integrated syllabus for Brazilian schools: an open-ended model

An integrated model for the design of language teaching syllabuses takes into account the multidimensional nature of the language learning process and context.

Eclecticism in language teaching seems to derive from the consensus which seems to be emerging through the recognition that different proposals for syllabus organization can be combined in a consistent and effective way. This combination of methods and syllabus, however, should not be made in a random way. Rather, linguistic and pedagogic principles should be established a priori and be used as guidelines for the development of an informed, systematic and consistent teaching framework.

The following diagram illustrates the basic structure of a proposal for an integrated syllabus, which could be used as an open-ended model for the development of materials, design of courses or just a tool for sensitizing teachers towards some important aspects of language teaching.



A MODEL FOR AN INTEGRATED SYLLABUS FOR BRAZIL

The structural core provides the basic language material which will be activated or 'put into use' during the performance of tasks. The criteria for selecting and ordering the language content of the syllabus would be related not only to the usefulness and frequency of items to be found in the final product of learning, but also, to those factors which facilitate the learning process (teachability, coverage, isomorphism).

The methodological guidelines will define the main objectives of the tasks to be used and indicate their basic characteristics. These tasks would not only activate the language forms focused at particular stages of the course: they should also provide the opportunity to extend the learner's linguistic repertoire, give the students confidence to use language in a creative way and ensure a systematic link

between language content and methodology.

The use of a check-list of functions will depend upon the outcome of the tasks. It can be used by the teacher, in a systematic way, to enrich the linguistic environment to which the learner is exposed according to their communicative needs as they arise during the performance of tasks.

The modular syllabus represents the criteria which establish whether or not a new item should be introduced in a systematic way. According to Shaw (1982: 85), this new item should be introduced if it represents a "new meaning or use of a previous item ... a grammatical modification or development of a previous item(s) or a facilitative item". And finally, the process of course evaluation will provide feedback which could, in principle, modify and improve the language programme.

Central to this proposal is the belief that one should not apply a theoretical model to a particular situation without taking into account the problems and constraints presented in that context. On the other hand, there must be a certain degree of theoretical consistency in the development of an approach to foreign language teaching. Thus, a multidimensional approach does not suggest that we should draw the best 'bits' of different theories in order to create a handy set of heterogeneous principles which could fit into particular demands of different situations. As it has been argued above, eclecticism in teaching is only valid when it is based on a serious analysis of different theories which would lead to a consistent and principled framework.

The syllabus model proposed here, then, can be best regarded as a 'pre-syllabus' (Lee, 1977: 249) since it only caters for those aspects of the Brazilian context which seem to be relevant to English language teaching and, as they are common to most parts of the country, can be generalized. Moreover, it can only serve as a basic framework from which more extensive and explicit syllabuses which would be suitable for particular sets of teaching/learning situations could be derived.

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