Some Aspects of EFL Syllabus Design

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Introduction

In a language teaching operation, various decisions and plans are made at various levels: At the highest level, government and ministries decide the fundamental course of action, such as whether to teach languages, which languages to teach, who to teach them to. Such fundamental political decisions having been made, the regional education authorities decide matters based on economic, administrative and social consideration within the area; the second level is concerned with the implementation of these decisions; that is, the problems of what to teach and how to organize it are discussed at this level; the third level where decisions are made about language teaching is that of the classroom. Here, the individual classroom teacher is left to decide how to teach in the class.

"The syllabus is partly an administrative instrument, partly a day-to-day guide to the teacher, partly a statement of what is to be taught and how, sometimes partly a statement of approach. It is the document in which is listed, ideally, the items to be taught, in a particular course, to a particular set of defined learners, on a given number of occasions per week or day, in a given sequence, with the aim of achieving stated interim and final goals or objectives, and according to particular teaching techniques for each and every item", writes Strevens. [1]

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1) Strevens, P., *New Orientations in the Teaching of English,* London: O.U.P., 1977, P.25

The task of syllabus design has traditionally been carried out by experienced teachers, but these days, this is being done as a cooperative effort; that is, experienced teachers and linguists work together devising the syllabuses and the preparation of materials. Since the planning and execution of a language teaching programme requires a knowledge of linguistics, linguists will be able to make a contribution to a number of practical tasks connected with language teaching.

In this paper I would like to discuss the guidelines for planning syllabuses and also investigate the contribution of linguistics to language teaching.

1. Planning a course of study

Planning a course of study for students and constructing the syllabus they will follow may be the most important operation of the whole educational process. We cannot, however, outline a course until we know something about the students for whom the course is intended, because the content of the syllabus depends on the aim or the aims of the students. Corder writes, "In government things go best when what the electors want and what the government does match up. So in language teaching we are successful to the degree that we achieve the best match between the objectives of teaching and the needs or demands of the learners."[2] The learners, however, do not hold just one opinion or objectives; they have, like the electors do, a wide range of opinions and objectives as well as a wide range of backgrounds, interests, attitudes, aptitudes, skills and understanding. Therefore, we usually have difficulty in finding out

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2) Corder, S.P., *Introducing Applied Linguistics,* Harmondsworth:
        Penguin, 1973, p.202

exactly what the learners want.

According to Corder, the objective of language teaching is to turn out people who possess sufficient skill in, and knowledge of, the target language for their needs, and in order to determine the linguistic characteristics of the learner's repertoire, "we must be able to specify, in sociological terms, what functions the learner will require of the language, state in what domains and for what purposes he is going to need the language, in which social group and language communities he is going to operate and in what roles in these communities."[3] But, in reality, it is almost impossible for us to do this; in other words, we don't know the way to find out all these points. It is true that the precise linguistic implications of the objectives must be understood, but still some varying degree of compromise will be necessary in analysing any objectives.

According to Wilkins, "there are no immutable and ideal objectives in language teaching. Objectives are set in relation to the particular teaching situation with which the teacher is faced. This means that, as far as circumstances allow, it is necessary to predict what kinds of language skill will be of greatest value to the learners." [4]

Halliday and others also mention it as "what was rarely attempted, but is now becoming more general, was a study of the needs of the learner in close detail and the preparation of a course that was specially designed for one particular group of learners." [5]

While planning a course of study, we analyse the aims of the course,

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3) Ibid., p.202
4) Wilkins, D.A., *Second-language learning and teaching,* London:
　　　Edward Arnold, 1974, p.58
5) Halliday, M.A.K., McIntosh, A. and Strevens, P.D., *The Linguistic
　　　Sciences and Language Teaching,*　London: Longman,
　　　1964, P.188

describe the students and specify what the students should be able to do as the result of the course. But one important fact to consider here is whether the aims of the course are general or detailed and specific. After deciding this, then we should consider how the syllabus can justify its aims in the social or pedagogical context, how its aims conform to social or pedagogical needs, and how its aims are relevant to the learners' needs. As Corder writes, "If the learner's motivations vary from a more 'willingness' to submit to being taught a language to a positive intention to learn a language for some reasonably well-defined purpose, the linguist must be able to devise syllabuses which best meet the two extremes of demand. It has been customary, in fact, to speak of them as two separate tasks; the teaching of the 'everyday' language and the teaching of 'special languages', or, in more recent terms, the teaching of a language for general and special purposes",[6] so Howatt writes, "A British child learning French may never have to use his foreign language, except perhaps during short holiday trips to France. So when we ask why we teach French in this country the answer must stress the general education value of French, quite apart from its usefulness as a practical skill. On the other hand, if a language is a second language in the pupil's own community, it has a clear practical use in everyday life, and the pupil will be aware of this. Similarly, if the learner knows that he is learning an international lingua franca, he will see its practical relevance for his future life, and more general questions concerning the educational and literary value of the language will seem less important." [7] The best results in language

6) Corder, S.P., op. cit., 1973, pp.204–205
7) Howatt, A., 'The Background to Course Design' in Allen, J.P.B.
      and Corder, S.P. (eds.) *The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics, Vol.* 3, London: O.U.P., 1974, p.2

teaching, therefore, will be attained when the aims of the course meet the learner's functional needs.

According to Wilkins, "the skill of the teachers, the size of the classes, the time available and many other factors have to be taken into account in the framing of the objectives",[8] so that we cannot talk about syllabuses without referring to questions like 'how the syllabus can be completed in the time available', 'whether the work is evenly spaced over the whole course', 'whether the learners are able to complete the required work sufficiently', 'whether the teachers are well qualified to cope with the syllabus satisfactorily', 'how strongly the learners are motivated', 'whether the syllabus makes use of any motivation' and so on.

Howatt sums up these points in a figure as follows:
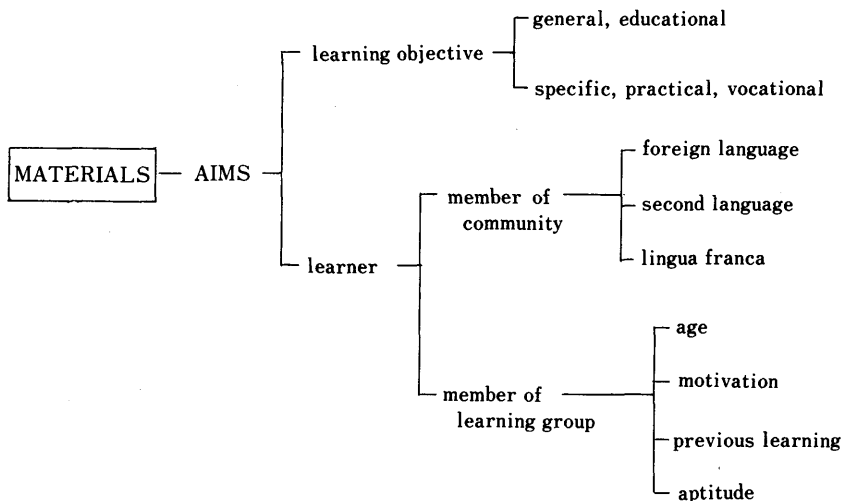
(Howatt, A., 1974: p.3, Fig. 2)

8)   Wilkins, D.A., op. cit., 1974, p.58

2. Organizing the course

2.1 Selection

We can neither teach the whole of any language nor can we teach individuals, so we must select teaching materials which go to make up the content of a syllabus. Since the objectives are reasonably clear in a special course, the choice of what to teach can be made fairly easily. But in a general course we often find difficulty in choosing the teaching points.

Although selecting material for a syllabus depends on the language teaching situation, 'selectability', 'appropreateness' and 'classroom need' can be regarded as general criteria which we can apply to linguistic items, even if items are sometimes categorized sociologically or psycologically. Meanwhile, 'frequency', 'availability', 'coverage' and 'range' might be regarded as more specific criteria and they will be used particularly for vocabulary or lexis selection. Some other criteria like 'simplicity', 'regularity' or 'learnability' might be regarded as pragmatic in nature. While selecting the material according to the criteria mentioned above, we must remember, as Halliday and others say, "throughout this process of limitation, whether in choosing which register to teach or in selecting the items within that register, the process must be carried out at all levels of language."[9]

2.2 Gradation

It is impossible for us to teach all of what we have selected at one time, so that we are forced to grade the material; that is, to put something

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9) Halliday, M.A.K. et al., op. cit., 1964, p.205

before or after something else. 'Grading' material takes the major part in syllabus design as well as 'selecting' material. The task of 'grading' is to organize the material in terms of order in which the material is presented to the class and the purpose of it is to make the content easy and quick to learn.

According to Palmer, "gradation means passing from the known to the unknown by easy stages, each of which serves as a preparation for the next."[10] This implies that more important, useful and fundamental things should be presented first, and less important, useful and fundamental things later on, and it does not necessarily imply passing from the easy to the difficult.

The language teaching process is usually 'linear', where new points are introduced one after the other with the implication that each point is learnt then and there before moving to the next. But, since no part of the structure of language is wholly independent or wholly dependent upon another, a simple linear sequence of items or groups of items for a syllabus cannot be regarded as appropriate, and furthermore, "no matter how interesting each separate bit might be, it is better that the student should be given the opportunity to experience the same features turning up in many different combinations, so that he may gradually 'grow into' the language as his experience of it increases."[11] Now the idea of a cyclical, or spiral, syllabus is regarded as a suitable way to solve these problems.

The cyclic or spiral process of language learning means that the

10) Palmer, H.E., *The Principles of Language Study,* London: O.U.P., 1964, p.67
11) Howatt, A., op. cit., 1974, p.21

same things keep turning up in different combinations with different meanings, so that the learner is required to continually experience a new word or phrase, returning time and again to some general area of syntax or semantics, for example, or domain of language use. Howatt points out, "In the case of our own language, we learn new bits of language gradually by experiencing them intermittently in different contexts. Of course, we have to notice that they recur—and in language instruction it is part of the teacher's job to draw the pupil's attention to those features of language that it is important for him to notice.   In addition, we need to have repeated experience of the same features of language, always in context and preferably in different contexts."[12]

According to Halliday and others, the total process of grading can be subdivided into two distinct processes; 'staging' and 'sequencing'.[13] In the first process of 'staging', we are due to divide a course into time segments such as years, terms, months, weeks, days and classes; whereas in the second process of 'sequencing', we try to decide in which order new teaching points should come. Even if these practical matters seem to have nothing to do with linguistics, we should respect, as Halliday and others emphasize, that "linguistics provides the description of the language being taught behind and throughout the whole task, and linguistics reminds us that the items being subdivided into units of teaching time belong to different levels of language and are being taught in relation to four different skills." [14]

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12) Ibid., p.20
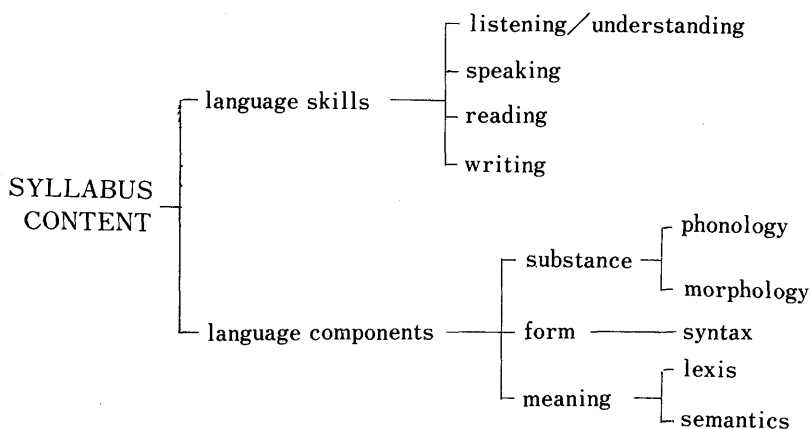13) Halliday, M.A.K. et al., op. cit., 1964, pp.207—212
14) Ibid., p.208

3. Practical work

3.1 Language skills and Language components

Before talking about the practical operation of 'grading', we had better look at the content of syllabus traditionally categorized in the linguistic terms. It has been subdivided into two dimensions; 'language skills' and 'language components'. The first dimension consists of four different skills; listening/understanding, speaking, reading and writing. Some linguists regard the two skills together such as listening and reading as passive skills, whereas speaking and writing are regarded as active skills. Others think of the combination of skills in a different way; they regard listening and speaking in one group, which are transmitted through air, whereas reading and writing are in the other transmitted by books or paper. The second dimension, language components, is also subdivided into 'substance' (phonology and morphology), 'form' (syntax) and 'meaning' (lexis and semantics). These stages are summed up in a figure as follows:

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                                           ┌ listening/understanding
                                           ├ speaking
                  ┌ language skills ───────┤ reading
                  │                        └ writing
SYLLABUS ─────────┤
CONTENT           │                              ┌ phonology
                  │                    ┌ substance┤
                  │                    │          └ morphology
                  └ language components┼ form ──────── syntax
                                       │          ┌ lexis
                                       └ meaning ─┤
                                                  └ semantics
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The relation between language skills and language components is summarized as follows:

Example: Listening skill

Substance   — hearing sounds
                 — perceiving significant sounds, word stress

Form   — recognition of word, word classes, grammatical categories
                 — recognition of syntax, clause patterns, clause sequences
                 — recognition of form, and function of intonation

Meaning   — recognition of word meanings, implications of grammatical words
                 — appreciation of the accumulative affect of words, syntax, intonation
                 — distinction major—minor information
                 — understand situation, context
                 — modify meaning what is heard
                 — recognition of what the speaker is doing
                 — understanding of flow of argument, etc.

Example: Speaking Skill

Substance   — articulating sounds
                 — producing significant sounds, word stress
                 — pronunciation of words

Form   — choosing and producing appropriate form of word, clause patterns, clause sequences
                 — choosing and producing appropriate intonation form

Meaning — choosing and producing appropriate words
— producing meaningful sensible sentences
— coherent discourse
— producing utterances appropriate to communicative functions
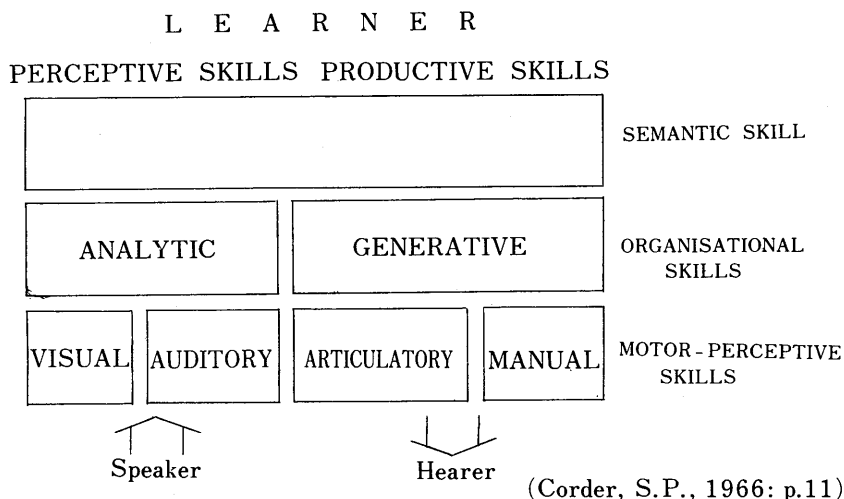
(source from lectures given at UWIST in 1978–'79)

Halliday and others show these interrelations between language skills and the main linguistic categories on a diagram as follows:

LANGUAGE SKILLS	CATEGORIES OF LANGUAGE				
	GRAMMAR 'Structures' 'Grammatical Patterns'	LEXIS 'Vocabulary'	CONTEXT 'Situations'	PHONOLOGY 'Patterns of sound'	GRAPHOLOGY 'System of writing and spelling'
I.UNDERSTANDING SPEECH	Some grammatical and lexical items are needed from the outset; they can be increased progressively		Dependent on what has been introduced in the preceding column; all items in grammar and lexis must be fully understood from the outset; new items must be introduced in meaningful ('contextual') ways	Full range essential from the outset	Not essential
II.SPEAKING					
III.READING				Not essential but often helpful	Full range essential from the outset
IV.WRITING					

(Halliday, M.A.K. et al., 1964:p.209)

We can derive from the study of this relation that the different skills do not make equal demands on the different levels of language.

Corder sums up his account of the linguistic skills in a figure as follows:

L E A R N E R

PERCEPTIVE SKILLS PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

	SEMANTIC SKILL
ANALYTIC / GENERATIVE	ORGANISATIONAL SKILLS
VISUAL / AUDITORY / ARTICULATORY / MANUAL	MOTOR - PERCEPTIVE SKILLS

Speaker   Hearer
                              (Corder, S.P., 1966: p.11)

From the figure above, we can summarize 'practicing one particular sound' as 'we are focusing our attention on the motor-perceptive level', whereas 'discussing about something with friends' is 'we involve all three levels at the same time'.   We can also derive from the above that language learning can be focused specifically on the motor-perceptive skills or the organisational skills before moving on to the semantic skill, that is, it is possible to learn phonology or grammar as substitution, completion, conversion exercises or drills of all sorts in isolation at a certain time, but we should bear in mind, as Corder points out, that "when we have succeeded in teaching a measure of organisational skill we still have to teach the learner semantic skill, how to make use of the language meaningfully."[15] Then when we are teaching pronunciation or grammar, it

15) Corder, S.P., *The Visual Element in Language Teaching*, London:
              Longman, 1966, P.22

should be possible to design materials in such a way as to force the learner to operate on a semantic level as well.

3.2 Staging and Sequencing

Corder writes, "However we define an 'item' or a 'grouping of items', we still have the problem of ordering them, and ordering, if it is not to be purely random, must be based upon some logical criteria. The ideal syllabus would be one in which the sequencing of items follows that of a system of deductive logic, in which each item taught logically derives from and presupposes the learning of some previous items."[16] Now our attention must be directed to the matter of 'gradation'.

Both 'staging' and 'sequencing' are affected by the considerations of the relation between 'language skills' and 'language components' that we have studied so far, together with the aims of the course: "staging will be affected because the teacher must decide the point in time, measured from the beginning of the course, by which a given standard of attainment in each skill must be reached; but sequencing is also affected because he must decide to introduce items from one aspect of language before or after items from another."[17]

There are many practical examples of sequencing, which is now regarded as the total task of 'grading' materials, in the shape of syllabuses and textbooks, but unfortunately there are few statements of principles for the guidance of others who wish to do it in a similar way. Some criteria, which will guide us in sequencing a list of teaching items, are 'availability', 'learnability' and 'classroom need'. In

16) Ditto, op. cit., 1973, p.308
17) Halliday, M.A.K. et al., op. cit., 1964, p.209

general, items in frequent use should be taught before those in rare use, whether we are talking of grammatical and lexical items, or grammatical categories, or types of context. "So the criterion of frequency not only helps to decide whether an item shall be selected for inclusion at all; it also helps to decide the sequence in which the items selected shall be taught."[18]

Let's take vocabulary gradation for example:

QUESTION: 'Which words come at the beginning?'

ANSWERS: —words with concrete meaning
—words with regurality in form
—words with one to one correspondence with mother tongue
—words with the association of contrast or opposite meaning
eg. large/small; always/never

CRITERIA: 'availability' (how useful the words are in a given situation), 'teachability/learnability', 'range', 'coverage'

"When one examines the arguments for logical sequencing of grammatical forms in a syllabus, they usually boil down to some vague notion of relative ease or difficulty, without foundation in linguistic theory or description. This is not, of course, to deny that some items in the syllabus are not more difficult than others for speakers of certain other languages."[19]

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18) Ibid., p.210
19) Corder, S.P., op. cit., 1973, p.311

To take the following example:

QUESTION: 'How do you arrange the following items in order; simple present, present progressive, passive voice ?'

ANSWER: simple present → present progressive → passive voice

CRITERIA: 'frequency', 'availability', 'range of situation', 'learnability' and 'classroom need'

— Concerning the matter of frequency, the passive voice occurs frequently in English, but it has a rather more complex syntactic structure than the simple present, so it is better to be delayed until the later stage.

— Simple present has a much wider range of situation than the progressive form.

— The progressive form might be more useful than the simple present for class, because it can be introduced with demonstration, but when it is compared with the mother tongue, the simple present is easier to manage than the progressive; ''the progressive form is not incompatible with an habitual interpretation;

    She's always making that mistake.

and the progressive form would be wrong with these sentences;

    I (can) hear some music.
    I think it's going to rain.
    Mary resembles her brother

but the verbs are not simply exceptions to the general rule since in other instances progressive forms are possible;

    I am hearing you loud and clear.
    He's thinking about it all the time.
    Mary is resembling her brother more and more.''[20]

20) Wilkins, D.A., *Linguistics in language teaching,* London: Edward Arnold, 1972, pp.75—77

From the study of the rules governing relations between items of language, we can get some indications for sequencing the material of the syllabus. But as Wilkins points out, [21] it is an item approach which risks creating a situation in which we teach only the form of the item, together with a part of its semantics, and neglect of a great deal of the structural relations that the forms may enter into as well as much of the semantic aspect of the item. Furthermore, Corder says, "What could be shown to be a logical sequence of items in terms of some linguistic description might not be logical in psychological terms. But learning is a psychological process. The fact is that at the present time we simply do not know to what extent linguistic categories have psychological reality, and therefore to what extent what might be a logical linguistic sequencing of items in a syllabus is psychologically logical, and therefore the optimum ordering from a learning point of view. Meanwhile, therefore, we may have to rely on whatever logic we can derive from linguistic descriptions." [22]

4. Further considerations

"No two syllabuses have quite the same purpose, but whether they are mandatory or advisory, they aim to make explicit the linguistic content of teaching in a particular situation," writes Wilkins. [23] Since the learning of a language is commonly identified with acquiring mastery of its linguistic system, there are courses which have a grammatical pedagogic organization and adopt synthetic approaches; in these

21) Ibid., pp.80−81
22) Corder, S.P., op. cit., 1973, p.308
23) Wilkins, D.A., op. cit., 1972, pp.77−78

courses the global language is broken down into a detailed list of grammatical structures and into a limited list of lexical items, and the learner re-synthesizes pieces of language which are presented to him step by step. The global language is re-established in all its structural diversity at the final stages of learning. The organization of the grammatical content is, here, regarded as the essential structure for designing courses and syllabuses.

There are, however, other ways of defining the content of language courses; "Components of language are not seen as building blocks which have to be progressively accumulated. A much greater variety of linguistic structure is permitted from the beginning and the learner's task is to approximate his own linguistic behaviour more and more closely to the global language. Significant linguistic forms can be isolated from the structurally heterogeneous context in which they occur, so that learning can be focussed on important aspects of the language structure. It is this process which is referred to as analytic."[24] The situational, functional and notional syllabuses are analytic in this sense.

Although a grammatical syllabus, which has an ordered list of grammatical structures as its core, can provide the framework for most foreign language teaching, we cannot conclude that language learning is complete when the learner has mastered the content of a grammatical syllabus, for language is always used in a social context and cannot be fully understood without reference to that context. We should, therefore, predict the situations in which the language is used and describe the significant features of situations; " the criteria for grouping the material are derived from the natural interests and objectives of the

24) Ditto, *Notional Syllabuses,* London: O.U.P., 1976, p.2

learner, and typically take the form of a series of 'centres of interest' or 'topics' as: the house, the family, the school, the post office, the street, etc. These situations are culturally, socially or behaviourally coherent and obviously connected with the notion of semantic fields." [25]

Since languages are learned for the purposes of communication, the communicative facts of language should be taken into account together with grammatical and situational factors. "The notional syllabus takes the desired communicative capacity as the starting-point: it is potentially superior to the grammatical syllabus because it will produce a communicative competence and because its evident concern with the use of language will sustain the motivation of the learners. It is superior to the situational syllabus because it can ensure that the most important grammatical forms are included and because it can cover all kinds of language functions, not only those that typically occur in certain situations," writes Wilkins. [26] But we should bear in mind that no semantic framework is readily available in the case of the functional or the notional syllabus. This is the major difficulty that has to be overcome in planning such a syllabus.

Conclusion

"One of the major decisions that has to be taken in the teaching of foreign languages is on what basis we will select the language to which the learner will be exposed and which we will expect him to acquire," writes Wilkins. [27]

25) Corder, S.P., op. ci. cit., 1973, p.318
26) Wilkins, D.A., op. cit., 1976, pp.18−19
27) Ibid., p.1

In a grammatical syllabus, which is now regarded as the conventional approach to language teaching, either phonological systems or syntactic systems or lexical systems are presented separately from the rest of the system of the language in synthetic approaches. But to some extent they depend on each other, then there is no clearcut linguistic justification for teaching one system before, or independently of the other systems. Corder summarizes this point as "we exemplify the grammatical categories with lexical items and interpret the whole in phonological (or ortho- graphic) form." [28]

In a situational syllabus, the grouping of vocabularies may be organ- ized on the basis of non-linguistic criteria such as 'centres of interest' or 'topics', because semantic fields are not so much linguistically 'well defined' areas of the vocabulary as those in a grammatical framework. For the logic of sequencing materials in such a syllabus, some sort of progression from the more familiar situation to the less familiar area of experience will be taken into account. Situational or functional based syllabuses, which take language situations as the starting-point, adopt analytic approaches, where there is no careful linguistic control of the learning environment. According to Wilkins, "analytic approaches are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes, and the units in any language teaching material based on an analytic approach are not primarily labelled in grammatical terms." [29] He emphasizes that analytic approaches are behavioural, and the linguistic content of any unit, while it is possible and desirable to be stated, is

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28) Corder, S.P., op. cit., 1973, p.315
29) Wilkins, D.A., op. cit., 1976, p.13

a cnotent that is derived from the initial behavioural analysis and it cannot be established independently of it. The analytic approach based on the learner's analytic capacities is therefore in contrast with those approaches that rely more upon his synthetic capacities.

In the case of the notional syllabus, "the process of deciding what to teach is based on consideration of what the learners should most usefully be able to communicate in the foreign language."[30] Here, the labelling for the learning units is primarily semantic and the linguistic content will be planned according to the semantic demands of the learner. The difficulty which has to be overcome is that the linguistic forms needed to express the learner's semantic demands are extremely varied, and furthermore, it is neither possible to bring all the relevant language within a single language teaching unit, nor easy to categorize the forms of every utterance.

Whichever syllabus the language course may use, the content of the syllabus depends on the aim or the aims of the learners. Therefore we should consider the future language needs of the learners and then decide what knowledge of the grammatical system, the sociolinguistic system, the lexical and the phonological system will be necessary to be taught during the course. Beside, in framing the syllabus, we should take into account various environmental factors such as the size of the classes, the characteristics of the learners, the time available, the physical conditions of learning, our ability as teachers and so on.

There is no course to solve all the problems occuring in language teaching, but cyclically organized course can be regarded as an option in solving the problems to some extent. One more point to be made here

30) Ibid., p.19

is that the syllabus is not an assigned task but a guideline for the teacher. The items of the syllabus, therefore, should be presented as the individual teacher thinks it relates to various teaching and learning situations. Here we should bear in mind that language is not a subject like science or mathematics, and that learning a foreign language is not identified with acquiring mastery of its linguistic system.

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