THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO SYLLABUS DESIGN IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

To design a syllabus for teaching a second or a foreign language, the syllabus designer should have the learners' interests at heart. A syllabus or a description of the contents of a course of instruction and the order in which they are to be taught may be based on the grammatical items and vocabulary or the language needed for different types of situations or the meanings and the communicative functions which the learners need to express in the target language and so on (Wilkins, 1976). The syllabus should specify the contents appropriate to the learners' background knowledge of the target language, and the level to be achieved in the target language. Most importantly, a good syllabus should enable the learners, at the end of the course, to comprehend what they hear, read, and be able to write and speak in the target language with ease if not perfectly grammatically correctly or at the near native level of competence. To date, many approaches to syllabus design in language teaching prevail and have been and are still in use but I will concentrate my discussion only on the advantages and disadvantages of the structural, functional-notional and natural approaches. I will discuss whether these approaches satisfactorily fulfil most learners' needs and interests. That is whether, by the end of the course, the learners will have what many linguists such as Krashen, Campbell and Wales call "communicative competence".

As early as 1957, Chomsky, in his book Syntactic Structures, discusses "linguistic competence" or the ideal speaker/hearer's knowledge of his or her language system and "performance" or the actual use to which that system is put in concrete situations, and in early 1970s Campbell and Wales, and Hymes were concerned with "communicative competence" or what the language learners need to know in order to use his or her language system for communication. Further, it is obvious that all languages operate on some kind of syntax patterns and so it is necessary for all learners of the second language or L2 "to acquire a good command of the basic grammar of the language" (Lee, 1980) and
since Hymes listed formal possibility or knowledge of grammatical form first as factors relevant for language use, I shall first discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the structural syllabus approach.

The structural approach began in the early 1940s when the United States entered the Second World War and at the time when there was a desperate need for people to speak a foreign language. The existing reading method at the time became inefficient as a means of teaching a foreign language for communicative purposes. At about the same time, Skinner's stimulus-response theory began to influence linguists such as Bloomfield and Fries who started to apply the ideas of structural linguistics to language teaching. Thus, Bloomfield and Fries's structural approach began with the view of language learning as habit formation. They believe that the patterns of the language, as defined by structural linguistics, needed to be "over-learned" by the students. When over-learned, these patterns of the language would be produced correctly as a result of unconscious habit. In their views, meaningless repetition of correct forms was considered valuable. Further, they claim that contrasts between the structure of the native language and the target language causes conflict. Because of the interference from the native language, they believe that the learners should be exposed to the correct patterns of the target language through drills and pattern practice. These should counteract this interference.

One of the advantages of the structural syllabus is that it is made up of units that are "capable of being broken down into discrete elements" (Brumfit, 1980) and thus can be systematically ordered or graded. This makes it easy for the learners to learn L2 as the structures can be progressively introduced. In this way, the learners can gain a good command of the basic grammar of the language. Carroll recognizes the importance of this and remarks that "there are rules of grammar without which the rules of use would be inoperable." Further, Lee declares that one of a language teacher's main tasks is to help learners to acquire a good command of the basic grammar of the language. Another advantage is that the structural syllabus is cyclic. This means that an infinite number of new sentences can be formed once the learners have mastered the basic rules of grammar. The third advantage is that the rules of grammar of L2 can be used to contrast the different meaning potentials and constructions of L2 with that of L1. The structural approach thus highlights the differences in meaning of L1 and L2. This helps the learners to become aware of the differences of the two languages and try to use L2 correctly or as correctly as possible as a result of exposure to correct patterns as discussed above. A competent knowledge of grammatical rules is an important asset for future communicative competence.

Since, after the initial stages of speech paralinguistic development, vocal noises and babbling, children naturally acquire and produce their first language by uttering single, simple meaningful words, then two-word utterances, followed by phrases then simple sentences and finally more complex sentences (Macaulay, 1980), the structural approach has a disadvantage of being an unnatural approach to language acquisition. Further, the structuralists, believing that the meanings of words and sentences are something intangible and could not be measured with scientific precision, overemphasise elements of structure. That is, they do not give enough
consideration to the meaning of the sentence used in a discourse as a whole. This often results in rote learning, drills and unnecessary parrot-like repetition, a method which is often unrewarding and unmotivating to the learners. Thus, unless the learners are highly motivated to learn L2, the structural approach may discourage the learners from learning L2 from the start.

Crombie further argues that the structural approach is an outdated and deficient linguistic model. The theory focuses mainly on the internal construction and does not stress the importance of the function of grammar and lexis (Crombie 1988:297). In real life, a discourse such as:

A: Doorbell!
B: I'm in the bath.
A: O.K.

(Widdowson, 1979:138)

needs more interpretation than just the lexical and syntax given (Crombie, 1988:297). The structural approach here fails to take into account what Crombie refers to as the elliptical constructions, substitutions and relational indices. This is further supported by the transformationalists who believe that meaning is an integral part of linguistic description. Therefore, it is impossible to analyse a sentence in isolation of its meaning in a discourse. Therefore, to analyse one speaker's telephone conversation would mean to miss out many structures which may not be evidence in a particular piece of message.

A good syllabus should have both the structural and lexical considerations within a meaningful discourse. It should also enable students to learn it actively. The structural approach seems to allow students to have only the passive recognition of the grammatical rules. From my own teaching experience, most Thai university students are able to get very high marks for their grammar objective tests. They are able to recognise the subject, verb agreements, the tenses and so on when doing the grammar exercises. However, they seem to have very little or no knowledge all of these rules when doing their writings. So here the structural approach fails to reach the course designers' objective of enabling students to master L2 in active learning situations. This has been proved by Krashen who says "Take the same subjects and give them a paper and pencil grammar test...They bring in the subconscious grammar. This is the intrusion of the monitor. In adults that third person singular jumps up. It is an easy rule to learn."

Another important disadvantage that Blair points out is that learning, in the structural approach, is directed totally at mere learning and not at acquisition. Research in child language acquisition suggests strongly that teaching, as instructed grammar-based approaches, does not facilitate acquisition which is subconscious and implicit knowledge. Therefore, formal teaching does not help. Acquisition would improve with more concentration on vocabulary and comprehension rather than with concentration on syntax alone. At least drills and exercises should be as close to real communication as possible. (Terrel, 1970: 172). Dulay and Burt (1973: 257) also say that "Perhaps the most important characteristic of a natural communication situation that is most overlooked in language classrooms is that the attention of the speaker and hearer is on the message or the context of the verbal exchange rather than on its forms." Further, Wilkin claims that the
conventional grammar syllabus attempts to teach the entire grammar systems. Thus it disregards the specific language needs and the fact that not all learners may be interested in and give equal importance to all parts of the system.

To a certain but limited extent, the Notional-Functional (N-F) approach is an improvement on the rather old-fashioned structural approach. The N-F approach emphasises the importance of individual needs (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). It considers the individual or L2 learners' ability to use real, appropriate language to communicate and interact with others as its primary goal. As a result of a seminar in 1971 and commissioned by the Council of Europe founded in 1949, a group of experts decided that the foreign language needs of European adults should be met through the learning of language in units and subunits specific to the particular group of learners' communicative needs rather than in isolation (Trim et al, 1973).

By function, the F-N approach classify language in terms of what people want to do with the language or in terms of what meanings or notions learners want to convey rather than concentrating on grammatical items alone. Using grammatically and semantically appropriate items, the speakers or learners thus have a real purpose for speaking. Each notion such as the "present simple" and each function of the discourse units, e.g. request, complaint or suggestion, can then be integrated and taught meaningfully. A language lesson within a N-F approach can then be focused on individual discourse function situation. Though what learners of L2 learn from each function label is just an example of what to say in situations such as "suggestion", "threat" or "compliment", for example, these function labels in the discourses involved are the basic grounds to more complex future discourses. And since no human being ever produces or utters exactly the same sentences, I am certain that once the learners of L2 have had enough exposure to and internalised the grammatical structures and vocabulary needed for different situations, the learners will be capable of producing appropriate responses to whatever discourse situation they later face. For example, they can apply the embedded sentence rule and other sentence structure rule such as those for simple, compound and complex sentences to construct limitless number of their own sentences. So it is good for L2 learners to initially concentrate on what Crombie calls "a single structure with a single structure-related potential". (Crombie, 1988:286). A further advantage from the N-F approach is that it reduces the complexity of the learning task and it allows for an integrated treatment of the findings of error and contrastive analysis (Crombie, 1988:286) which is lacking in the structural approach.

Using the N-F approach, curriculum writers and teachers can develop what they need from the best and most suitable techniques for their teaching personalities and integrate the relevant features into a F-N approach (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983: 17). By learning the notions within a specific topic, the learners can process the material faster, more accurately and consistently because they can recall structures, notions and expressions available in their memory (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983).

Finally, an advantage the N-F approach has over the structural approach is that it includes cultural content which would enable adult learners to communicate and
interact with speakers of other languages. It would also enable them to work in foreign countries, go on a tour or use L2 in academic, cultural, technical or economic activities. (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983:11). Learning a language for the above purposes could be motivating to the learners and it could also promote the learning of foreign languages.

Though the N-F approach may have many advantages, it also has been criticised by many linguists for its disadvantages. One of the criticisms made by Wilkin, Austin, Searle and even Brumfit himself and also Crombie is that it is rooted in the structural syllabus. Crombie criticises it for not being finite nor classifiable. Further, the term "function" here is not context dependent as originally used in Council of Europe and in the work of Wilkin to refer to illocutionary force in the widest sense. Thus, as Crombie points out "...an utterance such as ‘It’s hot in here’ may function as a request, a complaint or a warning if no other context is given for the correct interpretation. So without the full context, the learner may not be able to understand the real meaning of such an utterance using the same structure as the F-N approach intends it to be. In addition, J.L. Austin commented that there may be as many as ten thousand performatice verbs in English which could be used as a label for illocutionary forces. He further demonstrated that illocutionary force cannot be defined in formal terms. Searle also doubts the applicability of functional classification within the syllabus. For N-F approach to be accepted, a finite set of functions need to be produced as commented by Brumfit, "...Until it is possible to produce a finite set of functions, it will not be possible to discuss them theoretically, for each scholar can pluck new examples out of the air whenever the need arises."

Crombie also criticises the N-F approach for having no relations between and among the functions. The interpretation or definition of a function is determined by context. Thus, the functional interpretation of any utterance depends on the situation, the role of participants, the various purposes of the speakers besides the cultural knowledge and the knowledge of the world. (White, 1988). White also argues in support of Crombie that one language function may be expressed in more than one way and that one exponent may express more than one function. Therefore, there is no one-to-one relationship between the context and the function, or the function and the exponent. Further, language functions do not usually occur in isolation. This is evident in Crombie’s discussion of "binary discourse values". For example, the functions of accepting and declining an offer or invitation usually occur as part of an exchange in which offering or inviting appear in a preceding discourse, thus:

A: Invites B to the cinema.
B: Accepts A’s offer.

or

Declines A’s offer.

Crombie further states that the value or meaning of B’s utterance depends on the value or meaning of A’s. Hence, the value of accept or decline within such an exchange depends upon the relationship with invite. So the problem is the learner may know how to recognize and produce an acceptance or refusal, but not be able to make an offer. (White, 1988). To a certain extent, this may be true but I disagree with White in that B may make an offer by using A’s piece of discourse.

The N-F approach is criticised for
giving no guidance at all to a course writer as to what linguistic items should be included. (Crombie, 1988:285). It also has no grading criteria as such so students of L2 cannot progress from simple to complicated notions. Thus, a learner may be confused by the construction involving the "present simple" as it may be used for different concepts such as "habitual occurrence", "future occurrence", "timelessness" and "narrative past" (Crombie, 1988:286). In addition, Widdowson also pointed out that inventories of functions and notions do not necessarily reflect the way languages are learned. This, he claims, is also true for inventories of grammatical points and lexical items. Thus, dividing language into discrete units of whatever type misrepresents the nature of language as communication. (Widdowson, 1979).

The natural approach to language teaching was developed in the 19th century as a reaction to the grammar-translation and probably the notional functional approach. The natural approach emphasises the use of the spoken language, the use of objects and actions in teaching the meanings of words and structures. Further, the need to make language teaching follow the natural principles of first language learning is also included. Linguists have seen both the advantages and the disadvantages of the natural approach.

In his natural approach, Krashen argues against the approaches used by the structuralists and the notional-functionalists. According to Krashen, language is acquired by having comprehensible input. Thus, if the learners are immersed in the target language environment, they will "acquire" the structures of the language in a more or less predictable way. That is in the order that speakers of the target language will normally produce. The advantage resulting from this observation is that it is not necessary to try to teach grammar in isolation. Since the natural order of grammar morpheme such as ing, progressive, plural, copula (to be) and so on, appear reliably, conscious learning can only be used as a Monitor or an Editor. What Krashen means by this is that when we produce utterances in an L2, the utterance is "initiated" by the acquired system. The monitor is used to make changes in our utterances only after the utterances have been generated by the acquired system. Moreover, the natural approach theorists claim that "fluency" is a result of acquisition or what we have "picked up" not of "formal knowledge." Thus, the most important thing in learning an L2 is the knowledge of large vocabulary as Bolinger says, "that anyone who has mastered a foreign language knows well that the majority of time is spent mastering the lexicon of that language...the quantity of information in the lexicon far outweigh that in any other part of the language and if there is anything to the notion of redundancy it should be easier to reconstruct a message containing just the words than one containing just the syntactic relations." Thus, the structural and notional-functional approaches have placed too much emphasis on the grammar and not enough on the lexical. Through the natural approach, an advantage is that L2 learners do not need to worry about learning all the grammatical rules incomprehensibly. They initially only need to try to understand what is being said within that context. Trying to understand a piece of information within the context is where the natural approach is similar to the N-F approach. Since understanding the context is emphasised, the learners do not need to worry about giving an answer when they do not feel ready to do so. Thus, their anxiety is reduced and when they are ready to orally
participate they can do so confidently in their own language or in L2 in both languages. The naturalists further claim that the learners will acquire the L2 in the natural way children acquire their first language and when these learners are ready to use the target language, they will be using it for real communication. Like children, adults also have the ability to "pick up" languages later than after puberty and that implicit knowledge cannot be achieved through formal teaching though learning helps to get the explicit knowledge.

Another advantage of learning an L2 through the natural approach is that the contextual meaning helps learner to progress from stage i or the acquirer's level of competence to a stage i+1 or the next stage immediately following i along some natural order. (Blair, 1977). This means that language input must always be at the learner's comprehensible level plus a little of the next stage. A further advantage here is that there is no need to grade the grammar rules for the learners. The teacher only needs to make sure that the learners understand what is being said or read. The learners will automatically learn the stage i+1. So the course syllabus can concentrate on what the learners are interested in or need. Hence, the learners will be motivated to learn L2 for whatever purpose they have in mind e.g. for travelling or academic purpose. Their speed of acquisition should also depend on their level of motivation as well. The more motivated they are, the faster they will acquire L2. Thus, the "net" cast by the teacher of L2 will be meaningful to the learners and cover all the natural structures needed for such course context since it is impossible to use only any one rule in a language lesson or a situation or a discourse if the lesson is to be meaningful. Consequently, it is more natural to concentrate on meaning rather than on form. This means that the teacher must use a lot of teacher's talk or simple language in the classroom. That is he has to use the caretaker speech or the simplified language for the learners. However, the teacher does not necessarily have to just concentrate on the "here" and "now" that children need to understand in their natural process of cognition before they are able to understand "past" or "future"; with adult learners these concepts are already acquired. This means that adult learners should be able to acquire L2 much faster.

With the input focusing on the message rather than the grammatical form and the fact that the silent period or the time allowed learners not to respond orally until they are ready to do so, the learners should be quite anxiety free in a learning situation. Further, the fact that errors made by the learners are not corrected in their oral responses, the learners will have a positive self-image when they actively and confidently produce utterances in L2. The "correct" utterances produced will give them a positive reinforcement which will motivate them to seek and obtain more input. (Blair, 1977). As a consequence, the learners will also have a positive attitude to the L2.

The natural approach, using the silent period, allows for individual natural order, age differences and the variation in ability to acquire or learn L2. This means that the Monitor over-users will be able to learn and acquire the same course at a faster rate than the Monitor under-users and the optimal users will be able to use it when it is appropriate and when it does not interfere with communication. (Blair, 1977).

From the above discussion of the
natural approach, some disadvantages are inevitable. These disadvantages will be discussed below. In a classroom situation, the monitor may interfere with active participation. This is because the learners must have enough time to think about correctness or to focus on form and, moreover, they must know the rules. In a normal discourse situation, the speaker has no time and therefore will not be able to focus on form. He can only use the rules he has acquired in the long term memory to communicate effectively. I think that repeated usage imprints the various notions and functions in the learners' long term memory node.

Krashen and Terrel declare that the "natural approach is designed to develop basic personal communication skills—both oral and written. It was not developed specifically to teach academic learning skills, although it appears reasonable to assume that a good basis in the latter." This means that only people who are interested in learning an L2 for its own sake will be motivated to learn and it may take the learner a long time before he can master the L2. However, most people now learn L2 for academic purposes, i.e. to study in an L2 medium university, rather than for casual purposes as travelling, so there is a need to find an approach that will enable the learners to master the L2 as quickly as possible. For other purposes such as tourism, the tourists may not necessarily need to know L2, since they can join tour groups that provide guides speaking the language the tourists comprehend.

A further disadvantage is that the "teacher" talk or foreigner's talk does not necessarily occur in the normal conversation of the L2. Therefore, there must be a way to help learners understand normal speed discourses as soon as possible.

David Nunan criticises the natural approach when Krashen and Terrel assume that the development of communication skills will facilitate the development of academic learning skills. The natural approach theorists seem to assume that language consists of a single underlying psychological skill, and that developing the ability, say, to understand the radio will assist the learner to comprehend academic lectures. Further, Krashen and Terrel are criticised for their assumption that learning takes place in a social vacuum and that the social aspects of the learning environment, especially the classroom, are irrelevant to what and how learners learn. Breen also questions this assumption. He states that:

"How things are done and why they are done have particular psychological significance for the individual and for the group. The particular culture of a language class will socially act in certain ways, but these actions are extensions or manifestations of the psychology of the group. What is significant for the learners (and the teachers) in a classroom is not only their individual thinking and behaviour, nor the long term mastery of a syllabus, but the day-to-day interpersonal rationalization of what is to be done, why and how."

(Breen 1985:149)

From the discussion of the advantages and the disadvantages of the three approaches mentioned above, it can be concluded that the
approach to language teaching and learning has progressed a long way since the once popular grammar-translation method. However, not one of these approaches has mentioned or proposed a quick way for an L2 learner to learn to communicate both orally and through writing, especially to the level needed to achieve success in L2. Thus, apart from the learner’s motivation to acquire L2, the best approach would probably be the right combination of the three approaches, with perhaps a stronger emphasis on the natural approach for meaningful learning as Terrel says, "the research to date has not been able to show that any one method or approach produces better results in terms of language performance." (Terrel, 1983:173)

BIBLIOGRAPHY


