

A modular communicative syllabus (1): the underlying ideas

A. M. Shaw

This article and the next describe a project in syllabus design at the British Institute, Madrid, where gradual adoption of a 'functional approach' and the use of a variety of different textbooks at elementary level had made a new syllabus imperative. In the first article the principles on which the framework for the experimental syllabus were constructed are discussed, and the rationale behind the attempt to make the syllabus both 'notional' and 'structural' is explained.

The project introduced in this article came about as an attempt to find a practical solution to two sets of practical problems. Although these problems arose in the context of normal teaching and experimental work at the British Institute, Madrid, they are problems which are likely to be shared by any forward-looking language-teaching institution.

The second point I would like to make is that this project is still in its early stages. Thus, what I am presenting in this article is a number of ideas (largely derived from work on my thesis) which I cannot claim have been upheld by prolonged and systematic practical application. It might be suggested that at this stage publication is premature. I feel that it is nonetheless justified, firstly by the interest which the ideas have aroused, and secondly by the hope that others besides ourselves might carry them further, and that more might thus be achieved in a wide range of situations.

In this article, I shall first give a brief definition of my terms, and then discuss the circumstances which gave rise to the project and its main objectives. Various aspects of the theoretical background will then be considered, namely the relationship between grammatical and functional items, what I see as the most important considerations relating to grading, and the status of syllabuses in relation to ideas about 'free' and 'programmed' language teaching. I shall finish by discussing the 'modular communicative' syllabus itself—the underlying ideas, procedures for developing it and considerations concerning its future development.

A definition By *syllabus* I simply mean a 'plan for part of the curriculum'. *Communicative* means that the communicative aspect, here in the form of functions, is given due importance, but not that the necessary grammatical items are neglected. The term *modular* means that items can be taken out of sequence. (It does not of course exclude the possibility of larger thematic, situational, or other modules as a form of organization.)

The background During the past few years our pleas for more interesting and communicatively orientated materials for the elementary stages of English

teaching had been met with a deluge of new courses. Some of these are mainly 'structure-based', though perhaps with emphasis on communicative aspects; others are either tentatively or almost exclusively functional, with treatment of grammatical material ranging from adequate to almost non-existent.

Our inclinations as well as our obligations have led us to try out as many of these courses as appear to have some chance of success in our situation (adult students, from the age of 17 upwards). Where aims differ as much as they do in such a situation a real problem is created: after the first year, students are expected to go on to the second-year course; if some have an ability to perform certain language functions adequately, but little independent command of the grammar involved, and others have achieved some control of the basic grammar without being able to perform with fluency a corresponding range of functions, the second-year teachers have no common ground to base their teaching on. Nor is it at all clear how students joining the courses from elsewhere should be tested for placement.

Our first-year co-ordinator, Sheila Estaire (see the following article), was very much aware of this problem, and had carried out a detailed analysis, in grammatical and functional terms, of the content of the main textbooks in use. In an attempt to achieve some kind of uniformity among students using different course books, we agreed that core lists of both grammatical items and functions should be drawn up, so that teachers could do supplementary work on the items not adequately dealt with in their textbooks.

The other problems arose from the experimental work initiated by Patrick Early (see Early 1978). In this experiment, classes were doing three hours per week using their normal textbooks, and for the remaining two hours, were doing communicative work, using either a variety of techniques derived from Community Language Learning, or various drama techniques, ranging in language focus from the relatively controlled to the relatively free.

It is clear that, in the freer work, students were inevitably using language which they had learnt in normal work based on their coursebooks. But in addition to this, the need was continually felt for items which had not been presented. It would have been easy to ignore this need for new items and assume that it would take care of itself; students would remember and gradually pick up those items they felt they needed most. With many items this would doubtless have happened; these were either individual lexical items, or else grammatical items of a kind so similar to those in their native language that they could be acquired almost automatically. In the case of such items, it is almost certainly best for the teacher not to intervene.

However, there were a number of items not yet presented in the textbooks for which the need continually recurred in communicative work. The simple past tense was a case in point. Here the teacher could have decided to leave the problem to take care of itself until the textbook dealt with the point. (This may in fact often lead to those who 'know' mis-teaching those who do not!) I would, however, suggest two considerations. The first is that, if teachers take this attitude, they will be failing to capitalize on an ideal teaching situation: they have the opportunity to teach important language to meet a continually experienced communicative need. The second consideration is that teachers will have to continue to waste time supplying language which the pupils could much more economically have acquired through systematic teaching.

I shall therefore argue that a major function of the syllabus is to give teachers sufficient information to help them decide whether or not to deal with a given item before it would normally occur. Some of the considerations underlying this kind of decision are discussed in the next section.

Theoretical considerations
Relationship between grammatical and functional items

Much of the less informed discussion of 'functional/notional' or 'communicative' syllabuses has suggested that a syllabus has to be *either* 'functional/notional/communicative' or 'structural/grammatical'. (See Wilkins 1976 and Shaw 1977 for a more detailed discussion of different types of syllabus.)

I would argue that a syllabus should take account of both types of knowledge, though either may *predominate* according to the needs of the student (English for specific purposes or general English, for example), to the convictions of the syllabus-developers, and, to some extent, to the level of proficiency (i.e. elementary or advanced).

If the decision is made that *grammatical* knowledge should predominate, there needs to be an attempt to specify communicative objectives (functions of language in communicative situations) to which grammatical knowledge may be related. If it is decided that *communicative* aims should predominate, the syllabus-developers need to specify those areas of the relevant grammar which will benefit from being focused on as grammar, rather than from just being learnt incidentally.

It is clear that a functional item is not tied to any specific realization. Most functions have a wide range of possible realizations which vary, partly according to the situation, and partly according to the inclinations of the speaker. Each realization will involve certain grammatical items, some of which may seem to require specific teaching, others not.

However, in a spiral approach, one or two realizations of a function will be introduced at each level, especially in the earlier stages. The grammatical material to be taught in support of the functions should therefore be quite manageable and easy to specify.

Grammatical grading

I mentioned above that a major aim of the modular syllabus is to give the teacher every possible help in deciding whether to deal with an item before it normally occurs in the sequence. This clearly raises the whole question of grading, and I shall now discuss what I take to be the most relevant points.

Applied linguists who have tried to develop clear criteria for 'complexity' or 'difficulty' in the detailed grading of grammatical items have not had a great deal of success. The difficulty of an item may result from the learner's first language, but this kind of difficulty does not have clear implications for grading. It may also result from the 'number of learning tasks involved'. (See Corder 1973 for an interesting discussion of this point.) A 'learning task' is not precisely definable in linguistic or psychological terms, but it is a concept which should be useful to an experienced teacher.

Using this concept we should be able to say that learning a certain item involves certain specifiable learning tasks. For example, we may say that learning to construct simple conditional clauses (e.g. 'If he gets the scholarship, he will go to University next year') involves knowledge of the word 'if', the simple present tense, the use and grammatical behaviour of the auxiliary verb 'will', as well as such things as pronouns, nouns, basic sentence structures, adverbials, and so on. The learner will be best equipped to learn it if he has already completed all these learning tasks

except for the word 'if' and the actual use and meaning of Simple Conditionals.

I will generalize my conclusions so far as follows: in order to reduce the new learning involved in an item to the minimum number of new tasks, we need to be able to say that the learner is best equipped to learn item x if he already knows items a, b, and c. In other words, it may be desirable to teach items a, b, and c before embarking on item x. As we shall see, a syllabus can make use of this idea by stating the main items of previous knowledge which, for practical purposes, may be regarded as either desirable or essential before a given new item is taught.

It should be remembered that we are considering the question of grading from the point of view of making a decision about whether a certain item should be introduced at a certain point that is not its normal place in the sequence. With this in mind, there are a number of ways of looking at a new item which may help us in deciding whether to introduce it at all, and, if so, how to deal with it. These ways may be summarized as follows:

1 A new meaning or use of a previous item

An example of this is when the present simple tense, after being introduced first for habitual actions or 'likes and dislikes', is presented with a future meaning.

2 A grammatical modification or development of a previous item or items

This would occur when the word 'some', previously used only in statements, is introduced in interrogative sentences embodying 'requests' or 'offers' (i.e. 'Would you like/Can I have *some* . . . ?').

3 A 'facilitative' item, i.e. an item where learning may be facilitated by the learner's first language, or by his previous learning of the target language (L2)

Examples of the first for Spanish learners would be the use of the articles (which is broadly similar in Spanish, though of course with a number of differences), and general word order in statements. An example of the second (facilitation from previous L2 learning), would be the patterning of interrogatives and negatives in English: once one has been learned, the others can be shown to follow the same pattern.

4 A formula or partial formula

There are many cases where parts of an item are not analysed from a grammatical point of view, but the complete item is just learnt as a phrase. An example of a formula would be 'How do you do?', which is unchanging. Partial formulae might be expressions like 'Would you like (+ a/some . . .)?' and 'Would you mind -ing . . .?', or even 'Would you mind if I . . .?'.

The first two ideas summarized above would be reflected in a syllabus which lists 'relevant previous knowledge'. As far as the third is concerned, items could certainly be marked if they are very close to the learner's mother tongue. Facilitation by previous learning of the target language would, however, have to be judged by the teacher, since in a modular syllabus where there is no fixed order, the syllabus developer does not know what the students have learnt when they come to a certain new item. The category 'formula' or 'partial formula' will probably also have to be applied by the teacher, although it would in some cases be possible for the syllabus designer to indicate certain items which might lend themselves to treatment as formulae (e.g. 'Would you mind if I . . .?').

It might perhaps be argued that a combination of 'free' (communicative) and 'programmed' (e.g. based on a sequence provided by a textbook or syllabus) approaches is inherently illogical, because the rationales on which they are based are contradictory. I would argue that such arguments are in danger of confusing the issue by trying to force a multi-dimensional problem into two-dimensional terminological frameworks. Some of the relevant categories are 'analytic versus synthetic' language teaching (the terms are from Wilkins, 1976) and 'communicative versus structural' approaches.

Johnson summarizes a 'synthetic' approach as follows:

In a synthetic approach, the teacher isolates and orders the forms of the linguistic system, systematically presents them to the student one by one, and thus incrementally builds up language competence. (1979: 195.)

He summarizes 'analytic' as follows:

In analytic teaching it is the student who does the analysis from data presented to him in the form of natural 'chunks'. (1979: 195.)

Wilkins (1976) suggested that functional-notional teaching is analytic, since it involves the presentation of functional language in context with no ordered exposure to the grammar of the language. Johnson questions this and suggests that there are two possible types of 'communicative' language teaching:

One is characterized by the rigorous specification of communicative needs . . . , but often coupled with a methodology which is not significantly unlike traditional methodology. The other proposes methodological procedures that are quite often revolutionary, but equally often remains uncommitted on questions of syllabus design. (Johnson 1979: 194.)

He later goes on to say: '. . . many of the materials which have been produced following notional syllabuses indicate that this type of specification *can* lead to synthetic teaching' (p.196). Inherent in this discussion is the implication that synthetic teaching is less student-centred and natural (and therefore less good) than analytic teaching. I have no convincing data or arguments which would enable me to dispute this. However, it is not in fact necessary to place the two in opposition, for they are not, in my opinion, mutually exclusive. We may argue that much synthetic teaching has failed because there has been no analytic element. As Brumfit says:

Not to allow the learner *some* freedom to use the newly developed skills in unpredictable directions will be to frustrate the very abilities which will be necessary for the most effective response to the predicted needs. (Brumfit 1979: 186.)

Analytic teaching is not necessarily more student-centred, in that it often involves a choice by the teacher of the materials to which the student is exposed. Nor has anyone to my knowledge demonstrated convincingly that analytic language teaching actually benefits from omitting systematic input of linguistic items.

I would therefore conclude that one can usefully combine the advantages of both a synthetic and an analytic approach. A systematic input of linguistic items (structural and functional) based on a syllabus (synthetic) on the one hand, and plenty of opportunity for freer communication (analytic) on the other, with the added opportunity for systematic presentation of certain items, the need for which is shown in freer work to be recurrent: this seems to be a strategy which is defensible on both practical and theoretical grounds.

**A modular
communicative
syllabus**

It was to implement the strategy I have just described, that the 'modular communicative syllabus' was developed. Its aims are firstly to provide core lists of items for the 'systematic input' part of the course, and secondly to help the teacher to decide whether to provide systematic treatment of items arising during freer communicative work.

Since some of these items may not be on the core lists for the first year, it is necessary to provide, on the basis of intuition and experience, a supplementary list of items. Because the communicative work may result in a given new item being needed at any time, quite independently of the place of that item in the syllabus or textbook, the syllabus needs to be *modular*, i.e. not tied to any fixed sequence. (In fact items come in different sequences in the different textbooks in use, though broadly speaking, sequences do tend to be surprisingly similar: see Estaire 1982.)

In order to help the teacher to decide whether to teach a given item at a given time, two main kinds of information are helpful: previous knowledge (grammar or functions) essential or relevant to the learning of the next item (see the section on 'grading'), and references to textbooks and supplementary materials for the teaching of that item. The following guide-lines were agreed on for the development of a modular communicative syllabus for the first year:

- Step 1 List core functions and core grammatical items.
- Step 2 List the realizations of functions in the main textbooks, and check the grammar involved in these realizations.
- Step 3 Check the grammatical items arising from steps 1 and 2 for required or desirable previous knowledge.
- Step 4 List other grammatical items and functions it might be desirable to deal with (i.e. arising from communicative practice), and treat these as above.
- Step 5 Draw up a chart. The actual layout we agreed on may be seen in the following article by Sheila Estaire.

**The future development
of the syllabus**

Our discussion has been confined to the present stage of the project, namely the development of a syllabus for the first year. However, many of the same considerations may be applied to other years, and it would be logical, if it proves useful in the first year, to extend it right the way up. This would, of course, mean that the 'supplementary list' referred to above would simply include items which are already in the syllabuses for the other years, and might therefore possibly be dispensed with. It may, however, easily be argued that teachers neither want nor need to carry around a six-year syllabus, and that it is best to provide a supplementary list for each year as suggested.

Secondly, there is a need for some element of 'spiralling'; spiralling involves the reintroduction of items at successive levels with an increasing degree of sophistication. In the case of a grammatical item, new uses or modifications may be introduced; in the case of a function, new realizations appropriate to an increasingly wide and finely differentiated range of situations may be included.

This brings us to the next question: how can 'situation' be taken into consideration? As I implied in the last paragraph, the realization of a given function may vary according to the situation, in response to such features as the language event itself, the role relationship, the medium (i.e. written or spoken), the nature of the participation (i.e. monologue or dialogue), the 'key' (i.e. tone, manner or spirit), and possibly to some extent the topic

and setting (i.e. geographical location and time).

At elementary levels it may be possible to assume a 'neutral situation' with certain constant role relationships. But, as I suggested above, later on the 'situation' will need increasingly to be taken into account, if only initially in the form of 'degrees of politeness or formality'. The task ahead is to develop ways of doing this without creating a syllabus so complex that it is impossible to use.

Finally, what should be included in 'core lists' for each year? As the following article shows, there is a considerable degree of consensus between different textbook writers at the first-year level about which grammatical items or functions to include. However, there are certain items which occur in only one textbook, and the implication is probably that these should not be included in the 'core lists' for that year.

Conclusion

I have considered the reasons for developing a modular communicative syllabus, some of the theoretical issues it raises, and the practical steps which have been taken as a result. We have not yet answered the question raised in the final section.

In the next article the reader will be able to see in concrete terms samples of the results of these ideas. They may not look very revolutionary—why should they? But if they help us to solve the problems of co-ordinating our teaching to a greater degree, and also help teachers to ensure that students derive the maximum benefit from their freer communicative work, the effort will have been worthwhile. □

Received October 1980

References

- Brumfit, C. J. 1979. '“Communicative” Language Teaching: an Educational Perspective' in C. Brumfit and K. Johnson (eds.), pp. 183-91.
- Brumfit, C. J. and K. Johnson (eds.). 1979. *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Corder, S. P. 1973. *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Early, P. 1978. *Working Papers in Community Language Learning*. London: British Council.
- Estaire, S. 1982. 'A modular communicative syllabus (2): the project'. *ELT Journal* (this issue).
- Johnson, K. 1979. 'Communicative Approaches and Communicative Processes' in Brumfit and Johnson (eds.), pp. 192-205.
- Shaw, A. M. 1977. 'Foreign-language syllabus development: some recent approaches'. *Language Teaching and Linguistics: Abstracts* 10/4. Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkins, D. A. 1976. *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford University Press.

The author

Tony Shaw worked at the British Institute, Madrid, from 1975 to 1980. Previously he had served with the British Council in Kano, Nigeria, and in Malaysia, and had completed a doctorate in applied linguistics at the University of Essex, where his thesis was on the subject of communicative curricula. At present he is on secondment to the Centre for Foreign Language Teaching (CELE) at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico in Mexico City, where he is teaching on the M.A. in applied linguistics programme.