Some Principles for Designing
A Communicative Course

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Abstarct

There is an increasing awareness of the fact that we need to design new courses of English language teaching, as the old syllabi have become outdated. The new syllabuses should be based on communicative approach to language. The old syllabuses based on structural principles have not been successful in enabling the foreign learners of English to use English effectively in real life situations. Hence in this paper, some theoretical and methodological steps have been proposed to design a syllabus. This is done in the light of the results that we have drawn from various attempts already made elsewhere in research in the area of communicative syllabus design.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to give a logical basis for a communicative course, which can be designed for students who study English as a foreign language. We will mention fundamental reasons for the steps in designing such a course, and give a theoretical support for their selections. There is a great need to understand and incorporate the basic principles of course designing in the courses. Our course books as a matter of fact have become out-dated that ineffective in developing the required skills of language as communication. In this paper, we will discuss and suggest the basic principles of an effective course, after studying the research-based principles found in the earlier research and empirical studies. First of all, we would need to set the goals of a language course.

2. Goals

According to Dubin and Olshtain (1986), a communicative curriculum is based on view of the nature of language, a cognitive-based view of language learning,and a humanistic approach in education. Our goals should be influenced by these three considerations. We agree with the concept of communicative competence given by Hymes (1972), which entails not only the form of the language, but also what to say, to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It is concerned with the social and cultural knowledge and speakers are supposed to have, which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms. Communicative competence includes knowledge of appropriacy. In the audio lingual methodology, the learners were not able to use the

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language appropriately. They were taught in separate sentences instead of language as discourse in context.

Bell (1981) observes that language is a social skill which exists so that individual and group needs may be satisfied. He will, therefore, include knowledge of, and ability to use linguistic and social knowledge to create accurate and appropriate communicative acts. Fluency, accuracy and appropriacy along with skills of language use should be the goals.

For curriculum planning and material development our emphasis should be designing tasks which allow the learners to experience a variety of cognitive activities. We should make them think about the input and do something meaningful with it. In this way, they not only understand the input given, but also use language communicatively. The learners become aware of individual learning styles in participating actively in pairs and groups and inter-action with each other and the texts. We should provide enough opportunities to the learners to employ such cognitive processes as hypothesis testing, simplification and overage realization, by allowing them to speak freely without any fear of coersion. They are expected to use different strategies and tactics according to these purposes and needs. We should also provide them opportunities for context embedded and context-reduced language use, with emphasis on meaning rather than form. We should try to distinguish between language used m every day face-to-face interaction where fluency or communicative strategies are of greater importance and school setting where the learning tasks demand cognitive strategies in classroom activities. Agreeing with Dubin and Olshtain (1986), we should incorporate the principles of defining course objectives, considering the learners' proficiency, of developing learning tasks giving attention to their cognitive abilities, of designing activities for language use enabling them to develop necessary skills to interact with each other, and of planning the overall course incorporating both fluency and accuracy.

Though the direct method has proved better in Pakistan than many other methods yet many learners in this method were able to produce perfect sentences only in classroom practice, but were unable to face situations in which real communication was necessary. The pattern practice they were engaged in, failed to develop their communicative competence. We, therefore, consider it proper to choose the integrative (holistic) view which emphasizes the totality of language learning, and which works best with a communicative approach (Dubin and Olshtain 1986).

A humanistic curriculum stresses thinking, feeling, and action;it tries to relate subject matter to learners' basic needs and lives; and it advances the self as an object of learning. Learners, therefore, accept responsibility for their own learning, initiate activities, express feelings and opinions about needs and abilities. The teacher acts as a facilitator of their learning.

Having the above goals in mind, we should now discuss the objectives.

3. Objectives

We should intend to achieve the following objectives in designing a course:

1. Emphasis should be given to meaningful communication. Texts chosen should be authentic. Tasks should be communicative and the outcomes be negotiated in the interaction.
2. We should consider the learner as the center of attention.
3. Learning is considered as a self realizing experience. Thelearner has an active role in the decision making process.
4. Other learners are considered as a support group. They interact with each other, help, and evaluate themselves as well as each other in pair/group work.
5. The teacher's role is that of a helper and facilitator. Students needs should be given due consideration in the Syllabi as well as materials.

Following Nunan's perspectives in curriculum planning, we should take decisions in relation to identifying learners needs and purposes, establishing goals and objectives, selecting and grading content, organizing appropriate learning arrangements, selecting, adapting and developing materials, learning tasks, and assessment and evaluation tools. These principles should be reflected in the course based on principles of communicative activities, interaction, and in tests of communicative performance. We should also consider Bell's (1981) ten steps in designing courses, for example, specifying the learners and their purposes, deciding on methodology, testing and providing feed-back. In addition to this, Yalden's (1987) suggestions in this respect, should also be considered.

4. Needs Survey

Yalden (1987) includes communication requirements, personal needs, motivation, and characteristics of learning, classroom needs, learners' desires and wants, and those needs which may come in their future, vocational or recreational pursuits. What learners will have to be able to do in foreign language for their communicative..needs, should be given a place in the course. Oral communication which might be needed for recreational or academic pursuits should be recognized as an essential objective. It not only helps them practice conversation in classroom, but also provides insight into understanding of foreign culture. The communicative needs of the students should be related to areas of activity, topics and language functions appropriate to interaction in the classroom. The choice of syllabus should be based on the communicative needs and wishes of the learners in terms of self-expression and purposeful or transactional behavior. Working on the proportional syllabus in which a balance is kept between emphasis on form and communicative functions,as suggested by Yalden (1987), an integrated thematic based, and learner centred approach should be chosen. This approach grows out of thematic-topic based situations in the form of authentic materials depicting real life situations, and functional-structural activities.

5. Components

The components of the syllabus should be to acquire language, the setting in which the learners use language, the role of learners as interlocutors, communicative events in which they participate, learners functions, the notions involved, the skills involved in 'knitting together of the course, and rhetorical skills, levels of spoken and written language needed, the grammatical context needed, of a notional-functional syllabus (Wilkins 1976). Skills are abilities in learners to use language appropriately and efficiently.

6. Choice of Syllabus

As Brumfit and Johnson (1987) observe language teaching has shifted the emphasis away from, 'mastery of language use' to 'mastery of language structure'. Mastery of language use teaches the students how to mean as well as how to create form. The National/functional approach has immediate practical value and it will be demonstrably superior to the grammatical syllabus. The learner wants communicative ability. He will need a course where what he learns, may be said to have 'high surrender value' in Pit Corder's terms. (Wilkins 1976). We should, therefore, adopt Wilkin's analytic strategy for syllabus organization. It is expected that the students will themselves analyze the data presented to them, probably sub-consciously, will acquire language and convert it functionally to their use.

Widdowson's (1987) arguments for giving discourse prominent place in the course, should be given due importance. Emphasis should be given on a concern for the use of sentences in combination, with the features of cohesion and coherence, in place of sentences in isolation, Pakistani students need to learn and understand cohesion and coherence features very much.

6.1 Language Use

Language should be presented in such a way as to reveal its character as communication. (Alien and Widdowson: 1987). We should, therefore, use a lot of dialogues in our materials, and give the learners sufficient practice in the use of language for communication. Ability to use language relates to the parameters of possibility, feasibility, appropriacy. and performance as suggested by Brumfit and Johnson (1987). It is a part of competence which allows for the role of non-cognitive factors such as motivation (Hymes:1972). The primacy of speech is emphasis on fluency- Therefore, fluency rather than accuracy should be the basis of the course. Accuracy will take care of itself with the passage of time and practice.

A sentence can be grammatically possible, feasible, but inappropriate. Appropriateness suggests relationship to contextual features. Communication being the aim, we should give importance to tasks based on transfer of information, information gap, problems solution and free discussions. The learner is expected to be more responsive to an emphasis on fluency. We communicate with them as far as possible with all available resources, present language items necessary for effective

communication and [hen provide with tasks to practice communication in these abilities because of the structural approach. Communication only takes place when we use sentences to perform communicative acts. Van Ek (1976),also observes that an adequate course should be based on a notional/functional syllabus. Learners should be systematically trained to fulfil various language functions to handle various notions. We should therefore base the objectives on Van Ek's suggestions for different inventories in the syllabus. Notions, functions, and structures needed for effective communication should be grouped together in the syllabus, to be used in the units of the course. These objectives are 10 enable the majority with sufficient proficiency to make communication possible, and are based on exploitation of every day real-life situations including methodology initiation.

6.2 Skills

We specify language ability as skill rather than knowledge. Therefore,we should focus on the skills in the language activities. Cunnings worth(1984) observes that the learners need practice in copying with communicative
situations involving the realistic integration of language skills and the development of cognitive strategies. Our classroom activities should, therefore, be representative of and be modelled on the process that takes place in real language use.' We think dialogues practice, integrated skills are communicative and useful for presenting language of real use.

6.3 Inventories

Our inventories should be founded on notional/functional approach as it suggests tremendous merit of placing communicative purpose at the center of the course. Our course should set realistic learning tasks, provide teaching and learning of real language, give emphasis on listening and reading activities before rushing into premature performance, should give learners real purpose for communicating, motivate and stimulate their thinking, should express basic communicative functions, develop naturally from the existing direct method, exploit socio-linguistic principles, introduce interesting and useful topical materials and provide wide spread promotion of language (Finnochiaro and Brumfit 1983).

6.4 Themes and Topics

Themes should be divided into units and topics related to the themes. They should be divided further into lessons, because language should be used meaningfully about a particular subject which is relevant, interesting, and worth communication. Van Ek's topics should also be taken into consideration and be adapted according to the personal and cultural needs of the learners. Topics should be used as basis for teaching language in context with discourse features. Thus, the input should be interesting and easily comprehensible due to visual aids such as pictures and charts. According to Van Ek (1976) teaching would not be possible unless needed. Instead of functions or structures, topics as the basis of input, are quite natural in a communicative approach,

because people generally talk about a particular topic in a text form.

6.5 Functions

Function is the communicative use to which an utterance or text is put. According to Nunan (1988) functions arc the communicative purposes for use of language, while notions are the conceptual meanings. We should not grade the linguistic input in order of functions, but should use the experiential content as the starting point. Therefore, the content should be themes and topic-based because language is a vehicle for communicating about something. We should include those functions, which are required to be used by the students meaningfully. We should provide all necessary functions so that they may have purpose to do something with the language. These functions should be embedded in the context and topics.

6.6 Structures

Relevant structures which go with the functions should also be provided to them. The emphasis should be on the functions rather than usage. Grammar is naturally and implicitly supposed to be acquired by the students. (Krashen 1981). We should stress on meaning and use rather than grammar rules. The students understand the structure in use and 'pickup' the 'feel' of the rules by actually using them in context. According to Van Ek (1976), they acquire grammar by putting it to immediate use.

6.7 Lexical Items

We should also provide them a list of words needed for use when talking about some topics. They should be trained to deduce the meaning of new words in context.

7- Materials

We should base the materials on the principles of material evaluation by Cunningsworth (1984). They are related to aims and objectives. They help students to use language effectively for their own purposes. Particularly in dialogues- role-plays and an ability to carry through real transaction Learner's needs should be kept in mind before the selection materials. Learning units should be related to each other. We should consider the relationship between learning process and the learner's who adopt different Strategies in pair/group work with out any hesitation or fear of making mistakes. In the materials, we should integrate notional and functional meanings with grammar, thematic content and Lexis, as suggested by Dubin and Olshtain(1986). The materials should be derived from a description of discourse which effects the transfer from grammatical competence to communicative competence as suggested by Brumfit and Johnson (1987). The main perspective should be on skills and communication.

8. Lesson Outlines

We should provide summaries of each lesson which will help the teacher in evaluating the materials and remind him of the main objectives, procedures, tasks, and the skills involved in the lesson. A quick look at these out lines ,before the class, will greatly facilitate teaching.

9. Tasks

Lessons should start with motivation and stimulation questions to relate the situation with the topic and to bring out of existing knowledge of the students to develop independent thinking and prediction. We should have activities and tasks based on transfer of information and information gaps, which the students engage in. while listening or reading and after listening and reading texts. The criteria offered by Candlin (1987) in Nunan,for judging the worth of tasks should be taken into consideration. The tasks should promote attention to meaning, purpose, and negotiation, draw objective from the communicative needs, sometimes allow for different solutions should be challenging, involve language use, provide opportunities for language practice, promote problem solving, sharing of information, and ensure effectiveness of useful communication in pairs and groups. In the tasks, we should provide interaction element to promote language use in which learners negotiate meaning as suggested by Nunan (1988). The-tasks should include discussion on pictures, providing missing parts of a dialogue, problem solution, filling tables, finding main ideas, finding specific information, recognizing discourse features Judging statements as true or false, role-playing, discussing freely, and writing letters, reports, and paragraphs.

10. Teacher's Guide

The teachers' guide help the teacher understand the objective purpose, and the components of the lesson. Step by step instructions should be given to help him understand and be convinced with the techniques used and the reasons behind them. He can easily plan his lesson and modify it according to the needs and the situation. Practice in classroom tests should be given to the students.

11. Tests

We should try to relate the tests to the teaching so that they have a good feed back effect. The tests should be intended to assess the learner's performance and attainment. They provide a focus for purposeful communication. (Heaton 1988). They are supposed to increase the effectiveness of teaching by making adjustments according to difficulties. They provide the students opportunities to show their abilities to perform certain tasks similar to what they did in their classrooms-

Although language skills are fairly integrated, we should have separate tests for all the four major skills including discourse features to ensure their development. Heaton's (1988I) suggestions should he followed for tests by including dialogues, short utterances, picture description, ability to understand the gist, extracting key information and writing paragraphs. The tests should be subjective as well as objective. Vocabulary be tested for meanings in context. The tests should reflect actual teaching. They should be based on classroom tasks. Traps should be avoided in the choices. Emphasis be put on meaning rather than form and structure- An integrative approach in testing should be adopted by testing language in context, concerned with meaning, and communicative effects of discourse. We think the tests should be valid and reliable. They should be mainly concerned with comprehension and ability to use language, (Brumfit and Johnson 1987). We should give a key to answers subjective.

12. Conclusion

Having analyzed and described the basic principles of designing a language course along with supporting evidence from research based literature survey, we are now in a position to conclude that these principles of setting goals, keeping the objectives in mind, finding the needs, choosing the right kind of syllabus, emphasizing language use and skills, choosing appropriate themes and topics with proper language functions, the structures, appropriate tests according to the teaching, are very much essential and needed in course designing. By keeping these principles in mind and incorporating these principles, we hope that the course will be able to achieve the goals and objectives.

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