

# Factors in Syllabus Design

Ronald V. White

This paper explores widely discussed factors in syllabus design, beginning with a review of conventional elements in language syllabuses. The concept of communication competence is then considered, and difficulties in inter-cultural communication arising from incomplete communicative competence are illustrated. This leads to a consideration of how communicative competence may need to be given more attention in language syllabus design and of what the consequences could be of incorporating specific aspects of communicative competence in the language curriculum.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I am going to explore some of the factors which, though widely discussed, as yet appear to be marginal in the design of language syllabuses. I will begin with a brief review of conventional elements in language syllabuses, and will then proceed to consider the concept of communicative competence and I will illustrate what can occur in inter cultural communication as a consequence of incomplete communicative competence. I will then consider how communicative competence may need to be more adequately reflected in language syllabus design. I will conclude with a discussion of what the consequences might be of embodying specific aspects of communicative competence in the language curriculum.

## 2. Types of Syllabus

In my book on the language curriculum (White 1988), I suggest that there are two basic types of syllabus: Type A and Type B, the difference between them being characterised by two different question words: *What and How*. Type A syllabuses focus on what is to be learnt, whereas Type B syllabuses focus on how something is to be learnt. I then go on to discuss varieties of Type A syllabus: structural, situational, topical, functional/notional. Type B syllabuses, I suggest, are predominantly method focused, the process and procedural syllabuses being examples.

My classification, intended as a way of making sense of the diversity

which has evolved in syllabus types, may give the impression that the EFL syllabus world is full of pure syllabuses, neatly falling into one or other main type and sub type. A glance at virtually any textbook published in the last fifteen years or so will show that they are based on multi syllabuses, in which there is a number of different syllabuses in uneasy cohabitation, with one or other achieving ascendancy at different times. Of all the syllabuses, one retains considerable vigour: the structural syllabus is very clearly alive and well, forming the basis of many courses, with a varying amount of help from the functional syllabus.

The importance of the functional syllabus should not, of course, be underestimated. Initially perceived as something quite revolutionary, the functional syllabus has now become an established part of the ELT syllabus designer's repertory, though its origins in speech act theory have long since been lost sight of. Typical functional syllabus specifications include lists of functions, but what they don't tend to specify is the conditions which define when a speech act is a request and not a suggestion, a command and not an instruction, and so on. I would suggest that one consequence of this is that functions have, like structures, become divorced from use. This means that, just like the pilloried presentation of decontextualized structures, functions are presented and practised without full regard to the conditions which have to be fulfilled in order to give a function its illocutionary meaning.

This limitation is further exacerbated, in my view, by the virtual exclusion from any syllabus specification of the principles which derive from discourse analysis, conversational analysis and pragmatics. Although it has been common enough to decorate syllabuses with lists of ways of expressing relations between parts of a text through grammatical cohesion, or using indicators in discourse to signal logical or other relationships, few syllabus specifications give much attention to such language skills as the following listed by Munby (1978: 130):

(48.) Maintaining discourse:

- a. how to respond (acknowledge, reply, loop, agree, disagree, etc.)
- b. how to continue (add, exemplify, justify, evaluate, etc.)
- c. how to adapt, as a result of feedback, esp. in mid-utterance  
(amplify, omit, reformulate, ect.)
- d. how to turn-take (interrupt, challenge, inquire, dove-tail, etc.)
- e. how to mark time (stall, 'breathing-space' formulae, etc.)

Since the publication of Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design*, a great deal of work has been published in conversational analysis and pragmatics which has added considerably to our understanding of the ways in which spoken interaction operates. Yet, little or none of this has been reflected in syllabus specifications.

### 3. Communicative Competence

Meanwhile, our notions of what constitutes communicative competence have evolved from Hymes initial formulation to more extensive specifications, of which Canale's framework is an important representative. (Canale 1983)

Table 1. Canale's Framework for Communicative Competence

Grammatical	Sociolinguistic	Discourse	Strategic
knowledge of vocabulary, rules of word and sentence formation, linguistic semantics, pronunciation, spelling	rules of appropriateness of both meanings (allowable messages) and grammatical forms in different Sociolinguistic contexts	knowledge required to combine forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken or written texts in different genres; achieved through <i>cohesion</i> in form and <i>coherence</i> in meaning	knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called upon to compensate for limitations in one or more of other areas of communicative competence and to enhance the effectiveness of communication

This framework is not without its limitations. For one thing, it isn't clear whether there is any kind of hierarchy in the elements; nor does it distinguish between those elements of communicative competence which might be universal, and those which are open to variation. A more useful framework has been suggested by Shaw (1992), drawing upon the work of Coseriu, a German linguist.

In Coseriu's model, there are three levels which can be labelled as follows:

- Universal
- Local language
- Specific culture

At the universal level, there are units and principles which are common to all languages, among these being semantic units or notions, such as *agent* or *number*. There would also appear to be universal principles, such as Grice's Co-operative Principle, which underlie interaction. In addition, there may be a set of universal Politeness Principles which operate in interpersonal communication.

At the local language level, there are formal features which are unique to each language. For instance, the marking of plurality is very different among languages, as are forms of negation, word order and so on.

Finally at the Cultural level, there are the specific features of genre and sociopragmatic knowledge which are involved in knowing when to speak, what it is permissible or acceptable to talk or write about, and so on.

Table 2. Coseriu's Framework Expanded

Level	Universal	Individual Language	Textual [Cultural]
	Semantic units (notions?)	Formal units	Textual units
Typical Element	agent more than one	subject plural	greeting, request post card, news report
Success Criterion	congruence	accuracy	appropriacy
Mark of Proficiency	clarity, cogency Cf. Grice	grammaticality	conformity
	Being clear & coherent, conforming to facts, or at least maxims of relevance, using schemata for coherence, structure of genre, using enhancing strategies effectively	Conforming to system of norms used by all NS (Cf. pragmalinguistic failure)  <b>exemplary</b> Conforming to prescriptive rules	Being able to produce spoken & written texts of the expected form  Discourse & sociopragmatic knowledge & control in knowing when a certain type of text is called for & how it is structured; grammatical knowledge of style/register normally used in the genre

#### 4. Principles & Maxims

Let us consider the universal level. My interest here is in those principles which may universally underlie interaction, whether spoken or written, although my focus in this discussion will tend to be on the spoken mode. There are two sets of principles which are significant here. The first is Grice's Co-operative principles, which are among what Fraser has called mutually shared beliefs. A belief is mutually shared when

- a. both the speaker and the hearer believe it
- b. each believes the other believes it
- c. each assumes the other will rely on this belief in their interaction.

Grice's maxims are examples of mutually shared beliefs about how speakers behave in conversation, although any or all of these maxims may be violated at a given point in a conversation. Grice's maxims are as follows:

*Quantity* : Say no more or no less than is necessary.

*Quality* : Say what you believe to be true.

*Relevance*: Be to the point.

*Manner* : Be clear and brief.

In addition, there are considerations of

<i>Sincerity</i>	the speaker actually believe what s/he says
<i>Style</i>	the speaker uses a vocabulary and syntax consistent with the speech situation
<i>Politeness</i>	the speaker exerceis those rights and fulfils those expectations that the relationship with the other speaker requires
<i>Responsibility</i>	the speaker's actions are consistent with the ethics of the situation in which s/he is speaking.

Grice's co-operative principles, as Brown and Levinson (1978: 100) point out, are

an intuitive characterization of conversational principles that would constitute guidelines for

achieving maximally efficient communication

of the kind that is exemplified in the following exchange.

A : Where are you from?

B : Seoul.

A : Where do you live?

B : London.

A : What do you do?

B : I'm student.

Such an exchange, which resembles an interrogation, can hardly be faulted as a display of linguistic competence or as a very literal application of Grice's maxim of Quantity. However, as Brown and Levinson observe,

the majority of natural conversations do  
not proceed in such a brusque fashion

and they argue that

one powerful and pervasive motive for  
not talking Maxim-wise is the desire to  
give some attention to face.

Following Brown and Levinson, **Face** is defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself'. It is 'emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general people cooperate (and assume each other's co-operation) in maintaining face in interaction, such co-operation being based on mutual vulnerability of face (Brown & Levinson 1978: 66).

Brown and Levinson distinguish between negative and positive face.

Positive Face	Negative Face
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the want to be desirable, accepted</li> <li>• concern with being thought of as a normal, contributing member of one's social world</li> <li>• the desire for common ground</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the want to be unimpeded by others</li> <li>• maintaining right of independence, freedom of action within own territory</li> <li>• the right not to be imposed upon</li> </ul>

According to Scollon & Scollon (1983: 166), 'Politeness strategies are the codings of communication which provide in each case the carefully calculated balance of these wants which are continually under negotiation in public communication' and they prefer to use the terms *solidarity* and *deference* when referring to positive and negative politeness respectively.

Solidarity Politeness Strategies (Positive Politeness)	Deference Politeness Strategies (Negative Politeness)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emphasis on common grounds of the participant's relations</li> <li>• assumption that there is little distance between the participants and that there is also slight power difference between them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emphasis on distance between participants</li> <li>• S, out of respect for H's negative face, advances his imposition with care; seeks to give H a way out in case H regards imposition as too great</li> </ul>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. bald on record</li> <li>2. solidarity politeness</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• imposition assumed to be low</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. deference politeness</li> <li>4. off record</li> <li>5. not said</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• imposition assumed to be high</li> </ul>

If two people are co-operating in a conversation, what is necessary is more than the bare facts, baldly stated. Positive face wants require participants to establish common ground, while negative face wants call for minimizing of imposition. A conversation between people meeting for the first time will involve an interplay between these two kinds of face wants, particularly if the two participants come from cultures in which one gives priority to solidarity politeness, the other to deference politeness. The conversational extract below illustrates the interplay between Grice's maxims on the one hand and Brown and Levin's politeness principles on the other.

A I recently joined the company

]

B Oh, you did?

A Yes

B Mmm. And how do you like it so far?

A It's it's very interesting. I like music very much so you know it's I was hoping to work for record companies years so

- B [ uh huh
- A = now I'm very happy
- B Oh, fantastic. And you work in Tokyo?
- A Yes.
- B. Great. Yes. So did they show any good movies on your flight? [chuckle]
- A Yes, yes
- B [chuckle] OK
- A Sometimes you know ah the films are w-we can see the movies much earlier than in Tokyo in the flight.
- B Ah, right of course. Yes
- A [ Yes.
- B I visited Tokyo once.
- A Oh, really?
- B Yes, and I liked it very much.
- A Hmm hmm. And did you visit my office our offices?
- B Uh, yes I did.
- A Hmm, hmm. Ah good.
- 

## 5. Politeness Principles

Parties in an interaction have to observe a number of politeness principles, which operate in mutual constraint with the co-operative principles. So, while the maxim of quality requires stating that which is true, one of the politeness principles—making the other party feel good—may call for some mitigation of the 'truth'. The politeness principles were formulated by Robin Lakoff (1973) as follows:

- Don't impose.
- Give options.
- Make your hearer feel good.

Leech (1973) has proposed a number of maxims derived from the politeness principles, and these include the Tact Maxim which operates when, for instance, making requests or giving instructions. The Tact Maxim states:

- a. Minimize cost to other
- b. Maximize benefit to other.

Definitions of cost, imposition and benefit are culturally linked, falling within Coseriu's third level. So, although the maxim of tact is universal, there will be local differences in application. These differences are part of the sociopragmatic knowledge which each of us possesses with regard to the rights and obligations in social relationships within our culture or sub-culture. This knowledge also covers the range of topics and information which can be regarded as either 'free goods' on the one hand, and therefore open to discussion, or 'high cost' on the other, and therefore approached only with caution. In the UK, information about the weather falls within the latter. Thus, comments on the weather are not considered highly impositive, whereas questions about personal finance will be. Even trickier are topics concerned with personal relationships and sexual and bodily functions.

When it comes to the performing of such speech acts as requesting, the principles which apply to successful performance can also be quite tricky. A request is an act in which the speaker anticipates benefit from a prospected action to be carried out by their addressee. In other words, if I ask you to do something for me, I expect to benefit from your action. As a requester, I have to make a judgement as to the degree of imposition on you. In other words, how much effort will you be required to make to fulfil my request. I also have to give you the option of not complying with my request because of another principle which applies to the making of requests, namely, the preferred response to a request is compliance by hearer. Non compliance can be face threatening. It disturbs relations between the two parties by making the requester uncomfortable and it also causes discomfort to the party who refuses the request. If non compliance cannot be avoided, the dispreferred response will typically be mitigated and elaborated in various ways so as to reduce the threat to face involved.

Given this rather complicated set of factors, we can see that the act of requesting involves a great more than controlling the necessary language forms, among which are *please*. The speaker has to decide whether the request is a high cost request as far as the hearer is concerned and adjust the request form accordingly. If the speaker judges it to be a high imposition request, the forms used will express tentativeness, and the speaker will give the hearer options for refusal. Typically, such requests are preceded by a preparatory act which will signal to the requestee that a high imposition re-

quest is about to be made. This preparatory act thus alerts the hearer, who can then prepare to make a face saving refusal should this be necessary. An awareness of the significance of such preparatory acts is one aspect of communicative competence, as is having the linguistic resources to express them.

## 6. Pragmalinguistic Failure

Cross-cultural communicative failure is often characterized by what Jenny Thomas (1983) has called pragmalinguistic failure, which occurs when a speaker makes a grammatically correct utterance having a meaning or force different from that intended. In this case, the problem is not so much a lack of linguistic resources as inappropriate use of those resources. Some examples from Korea may make this clear.

In my hotel in Seoul, I found that the telephone in my room wasn't working properly. When I dialled a number, though I could hear the person at the other end, they couldn't hear me. In other words, there was only one way communication, which isn't much use on a telephone when only the verbal channel is available for the exchanges of messages. Since I couldn't phone anyone for assistance, I went down to the hotel concierge to request her to do two things. Firstly, I asked her to request housekeeping to send someone to collect a bag of laundry from my room. Secondly, I asked her to arrange for a technician to come and fix the telephone. The concierge immediately acted upon my request, and after calling housekeeping, she said to me:

I think you had better wait in your room

When, eventually, a man from housekeeping came to collect my laundry, he concluded our brief encounter by saying:

Have a good time.

Later that day, I went to nearby coffee shop where an enthusiastic waiter, keen to make me feel welcome, said:

You can tell me to do anything you want.

Though none of the above examples would be considered particularly

grave, each provides an instance of pragmalinguistic failure. In my experience, it is from such trivial failures that major communication break down can occur, so that, rather than crossing cultural frontiers, participants in repeated encounters of this type may find themselves setting up barriers to communication.

When the concierge said 'I think you had better wait in your room', she was using form of words which, as far as my dialect of English is concerned, is typically used to indicate a recommendation made by a speaker who has some authority or power over the hearer by virtue of status or knowledge. In this particular encounter, however, the status roles were such that the hearer, a hotel guest, is typically defined as being superior in status to the concierge, who is an employee of the hotel. The relationship is asymmetrical and it is inappropriate for the subordinate party to make a recommendation to the superordinate party, even when the proposed action is for the benefit of the other party. Rather than use a form of words which would typically be understood as being a recommendation, the speaker would more appropriately have used a tentatively expressed suggestion, such as

If you'd like to wait in your room, someone will be along shortly.

Perhaps you could wait in your room until someone comes from housekeeping.

Or even less directly:

Someone will come to your room shortly.

In this last case, it would be left to me, the hearer, to infer that I should return to the room in order to admit the people coming to collect my laundry and repair the telephone. The speaker would not have imposed on me in any way, and I would have been given the option of returning to my room under my own volition. In this way, the speaker would have observed two of Robin Lakoff's spliteness principles.

Now let us consider the benediction offered by the man from housekeeping: *Have a good time*. This would have been entirely appropriate had the situation and our relationship been different. Wishing someone a good time is normal when both parties know what the proposed activity (or *time*) is

going to be. In other words, information is shared by both parties. In the present instance, however, the hotel attendant had no idea what I would be doing that day, so to wish me a good time sounds like an intrusion on my personal space, as if in some way he knew what specific activities I had planned. Clearly, what he meant to say was what he and other hotel employees the world over have been trained to say, namely: 'Have a nice day'. Wishing someone a nice day does not intrude on their personal space in the same way as wishing them a good time, since the knowledge that there is a day ahead is 'free goods', common to all participants, and so the benediction is undifferentiated as to prospected activities. It is, therefore, generally safe to wish someone a nice day, though on occasion I have had difficulty in perceiving its relevance when these words are uttered at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Finally, the extremely obliging waiter intended to offer much less than his words suggested. What he actually said gave me permission to give him unconditional orders, whereas I assume what he actually intended was to make an offer of services appropriate to the setting in which the utterance was made, namely a coffee shop. What he probably intended would be expressed by saying something like, 'Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you.' or 'Tell me if there's anything else you would like.'

I have yet to see a language syllabus which addresses the kinds of issues exemplified in these examples of pragmalinguistic failure. Yet, in terms of promoting successful communication in English, it would seem to be very important to include coverage of the ways in which, among other things, politeness principles operate in a range of contexts so that learners not only acquire the forms needed to perform specified language functions, but also learn the conditions which apply to their appropriate use. By acquiring an understanding of these principles and by practising them in use in a range of situations, learners will be broadening their communicative competence. They will also broaden their range of choices, including the ability to flout these principles strategically when they wish to. After all, strategic rudeness is an important communicative skill. Unintentional rudeness is not.

Although I have focused my discussion on spoken interaction, the same features of communicative competence apply to such areas as English for Academic Purposes. Grice's co-operative principles, for instance, apply to academic writing. Where these maxims are flouted, readers will look for im-

plied but unstated meanings, Readers of academic writing will also expect the writer to indicate how accountable they are when, for instance, performing a representative. When dealing with a controversial topic or stating information about which there may exist a degree of uncertainty, a writer may not wish to be held responsible for the truth of their claims, so they will draw on a range of hedging devices. Knowing when to hedge is a sociopragmatic skill; knowing which linguistic devices to use is a pragmalinguistic skill. Both are factors to be included in syllabus design.

## 7. Towards the Socio-Pragmatic Syllabus

At this stage, I have yet to work out in detail what such a syllabus specification would look like. In a multi-syllabus format, it would add yet another line or column to the syllabus specification. Such a specification will have to be linked closely to the sequence of structures, functions and skills because, quite obviously, if interrogative structures are being taught in association with requesting, then the requisite politeness principles will have to be included at the same stage.

As an indication of some the items which would need to be included in such a syllabus, I have prepared the following list.

Who speaks to whom, about what and under what circumstances; high and low context cultures and styles; restricted and elaborated codes; rights; free goods and high cost goods; imposition; gender differentiation; pragmatic principles; concepts of face; ways of maintaining, threatening and redressing face; ritualization versus improvisation; sociolinguistic norms; interaction styles and factors influencing style; managing interaction; turn taking; conversational roles and the tolerance of silence; repairing problems; uncertainty and ambivalence; culturally different ways of expressing certainty/uncertainty, obligation, necessity, etc.; judgements about imposition, rights, obligations; genres and styles; formality levels; linguistic choices and norms; non verbal communication.
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

### List of Content for Sociopragmatic Syllabus

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have deliberately overlooked a number of other issues, including the criteria which will be applied when making decision about the inclusion of a sociopragmatic element in a language syllabus. For the moment, all I am doing is raising the issue as a way of opening up this vital aspect of communicative competence. In my view, it is necessary for curriculum design to take account of such factors if syllabuses are to be a truly effective specification of the content and skills required to develop the kind of sociopragmatic competence which speakers command in their native language and which will enable them to engage in effective inter-cultural communication in a common language.

## References

- Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson (1978) 'Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena,' Esther N. Goody, ed. (1978) *Questions and politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Canale, Michael (1983) 'Form Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy,' Jack C. Richards and Richard W. Schmidt, eds. (1983) *Language and Communication*, London: Longman.
- Fraser, Bruce (1983) 'The Domain of Pragmatics,' Jack C. Richards and Richard W. Schmidt, eds. (1983) *Language and Communication*, London: Longman.
- Grice, H. P. (1975) 'Logic and Conversation,' P. Cole and J. Morgan, eds. *Syntax and Semantics* 3, 41-58, New York: Academic Press.
- Hymes, D. H. (1971) 'On Communicative Competence,' Price, J. B., & Janet Holmes, eds. (1972) *Sociolinguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lakoff, Robin (1973) 'The Logic of Politeness: Or, Minding Your p's and q's,' *Papers from the 9th Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society.
- Leech, Geoffrey (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*, London: Longman.
- Munby, John (1978) 'Communicative Syllabus Design,' Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scollon, Ron & Suzanne B. K. Scollon (1983) 'Face in Interethnic Commu-

- nication,' J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt, eds. (1983) *Language and Communication*, London: Longman.
- Shaw, Philip (1992) 'Variation and Universality in Communicative Competence: Coseriu's model,' *TESOL Quarterly* 26. 1, 9-25.
- Thomas, Jeny (1983) 'Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure,' *Applies Linguistics* 4. 2, 91-112.
- White, Ronald V. (1988) *The ELT Curriculum*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Centre for Applied Linguistics  
University of Reading  
Whiteknights  
P. O. Box 218 Reading  
England, RG6 2AA