

CHAPTER 7

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR A TASK-BASED SYLLABUS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a synthesis of what has been discussed thus far; ESL in the primary school (Chapter 2), approaches to syllabus design (Chapter 3), task-based approaches to syllabus design (Chapter 4), the analysis of language syllabuses (Chapter 5) and an assessment of the present situation in South African primary schools (Chapter 6). The aim is to establish a theoretical framework for the design of a task-based language syllabus for primary schools in South Africa.

7.2 MAJOR FINDINGS

A synthesis of the most important conclusions of Chapters 2 to 6 should provide an indication of what is required in a syllabus framework.

As is pointed out in Chapter 2, the most important factors that need to be considered for ESL in the primary school are the following:

- there isn't a single theory that explains SLA adequately. However, each of the theories discussed provides valuable insights for the purposes of this study. The innatist theory emphasises the importance of learner-internal mechanisms and natural learning (cf. 2.2.2). Interactionist theories stress the importance of interaction in language acquisition (cf. 2.2.3). According to cognitive theorists language learning does not differ from other kinds of learning. They stress the role of cognition and metacognitive

strategies in SLA (cf. 2.2.4). Krashen's theories regarding the role of comprehensible input and the affective filter in SLA (cf. 2.2.5) have had a great influence on SLA practices. Input that is slightly higher than the learners' present level of comprehension seems to assist the learner in straining language resources and adding new knowledge. There is also evidence that learners construct rules about languages internally (cf. 2.2.2). Drilling or repetition, as suggested by the Behaviourists (cf. 2.2.1), cannot be discarded in a situation where L2 learners have little contact with English outside the classroom;

- pupils show a tendency towards a natural order of acquisition (cf. 2.2.6) that is not influenced by any order in which structural items are presented. Lightbown and Spada (1993:105) suggest that teachers should try to become aware of those structures which they sense are just beginning to emerge in the second language development of their pupils and provide some guided instruction in the use of these forms at precisely that moment to see if any gains are made. Scott and Ytreberg (1990:6) say that if pupils ask questions about language structures they may be ready to learn them (cf. 2.4.3.2);
- the primary school pupils' interests and levels of development should be reflected in the course content to motivate pupils to participate in learning (cf. 2.2.6)
- meaning-giving activities are more important than focusing on discrete grammatical items in the primary school years. Grammar may be taught in the Senior Primary Phase through consciousness-raising and focusing activities to hone accuracy skills (cf. 2.2.6). Spada (1990:308) reports results that indicate that opportunities to raise grammatical consciousness, coupled with meaningful communication, produce best results;
- primary school learners show a preference for visual, hands-on and interactive learning styles (cf. 2.2.6 and 4.3.6). If young pupils involve their senses in learning, they are active participants in the process;
- learning strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies need to be incorporated in learning

- activities and post-task reflection (cf. 2.3.1.3.2);
- meaning-giving, purposeful tasks assist pupils in learning through engaging in semantic, syntactic and communicative tasks (cf. 2.3.2). Turner and Paris (1995:672-673) report that where such tasks were used in primary school classrooms, language acquisition was assisted;
 - pupils are influenced by the culturally-imbedded nature of language learning (cf. 2.4.2). If the learning content harmonises with the existing schemata, learning is easier;
 - proficiency can be defined in terms of what learners do with language (cf. 2.3.3.1). This has a direct bearing on learning outcomes (cf. 2.3.3.2) and the means through which the outcomes are achieved (cf. 2.3.3.3);
 - the most important task of the teacher is to provide learners with an appropriate level of support during learning (cf. 2.5.1). In order to implement a syllabus effectively, the teacher should manage learning (cf. 2.5.2) through a thorough understanding of the syllabus (cf. 2.5.5) and the use of resources (cf. 2.5.4).

Chapter 3 indicates that language syllabus design must adhere to generally accepted ideas about syllabus design (cf. 3.3). The following model is proposed for this study:

- a situation analysis (cf. 3.5);
- the aims (described in terms of dimension targets);
- objectives (described in terms of learning outcomes) (cf. 3.6);
- the content of the ESL course;
- the methodology of the course, and
- the assessment of pupil performance (cf. 3.9).

Constraints that may influence syllabus implementation need to be planned for (cf. 3.11). The most important constraints that influence syllabus implementation in South Africa (cf. 6.3) are the following:

- many pupils are not exposed to English outside the classroom;
- many pupils show anxiety about learning English. This is mainly due to low marks, poor proficiency and/or a lack of interest in content.

These constraints need to be addressed through the inclusion of tasks which involve pupils in purposeful activities. It has been shown that learning-by-doing produces good results (especially for the learning of school-like materials and for less able pupils) (cf. 4.3.6). Learning can be extended through purposeful and relevant homework and assignments. Pupils should be encouraged to lower their affective filters through activities which lead to success in learning. Interesting and stimulating content should counteract boredom.

In Chapter 4 various models for a task-based language syllabus are examined. Task-based language learning has a firm theoretical basis, and can be based on Krashen's input theory (cf. 4.3.1), Candlin's output theory (cf. 4.3.2), Widdowson's discourse theory (cf. 4.3.3), Vygotsky's theories about language and thought (cf. 4.3.4), Halliday's functional theory (cf. 4.3.5) and general learning theory which emphasises learning-through-doing (cf. 4.3.6). All these theories provide a rationale for a task-based syllabus.

The models of Prabhu (cf. 4.4.2), Breen and Candlin (cf. 4.4.3) and Long and Crookes (cf. 4.4.4), and the discussion on the construction of a task-based syllabus (cf. 4.6) indicate the following:

- tasks are proposed as units of organisation or analysis for language syllabuses;
- effective learning tasks are purposeful, contextualised, authentic activities that involve the integrated use of metacognitive, conceptual, procedural and representative knowledge designed to bring about further learning (Clark, 1996:261) (cf. 2.3.3.1);

- tasks have three phases, namely a pre-task phase, a task phase during which pupils are engaged in task execution and a post-task phase (Clark, 1996:263) (cf. 4.4.2);
- during the pre-task phase, concepts necessary for the performance of the task are reinforced;
- the task phase provides the best results if activities challenge pupils' existing knowledge. Tasks involving reasoning-gaps, opinion-gaps or problem-solving in pairs, groups or individually need to be used (cf. 5.7);
- during the post-task phase pupils reflect on the completed task. This reflection aids learning through applied learning strategies like metacognition (cf. 5.7);
- task banks may contain real-life task-types, e.g. listening to weather forecasts and identifying the maximum temperature for the day), or educational task-types (e.g. listening to aural texts and answering statements afterwards by saying whether they are true or false) (Nunan, 1989:40) (cf. 4.4.5);
- the involvement of the learners in some aspects of decision-making aids learning, because they take ownership of the process.

In Chapter 5 current language syllabuses are examined in order to ascertain to what extent they are task-based and what they specify. It was established that language syllabuses for foreign modern languages in Scotland (cf. 5.2), for English as L1 in Alabama and Alaska (cf. 5.3), and for English as L2 in Holland (cf. 5.4), Botswana (cf. 5.5), Australia (cf. 5.6) and Hong Kong (cf. 5.7) reflect aspects of task-based approaches.

The Graded Levels for Foreign Language Learning (GLAFLL) syllabus in Scotland makes use of a series of graded stages which each has teaching content that is suitable for that stage (cf. 5.2). The internal assessment scheme (Levels of Performance) initiated the use of Bands of Performance in later task-based language programmes (cf. 5.7). According to these, pupils can be assigned to Levels of Performance within a Stage. It also indicates a multi-dimensional approach to content selection and grading; a

feature that has been refined further in the Australian Language Levels programme (cf. 5.6) and the Target Oriented Curriculum (cf. 5.7) in Hong Kong.

A valuable contribution by the Alabama Course of Study - English Language Arts (cf. 5.3.1) is a developmental profile of pupils in a grade. Although it is accepted that many individual differences may occur, such a profile provides generic characteristics of pupils of a certain age. This assists teachers in selecting appropriate content for a group.

The Australian Language Levels (ALL) programme provides comprehensive support in task description (cf. 5.6). This is done through the listing of contexts, themes, topics, likely communicative functions, grammar, modes of communication that are likely to be used and suggested text-types. This support for task description has been simplified and integrated in the Target Oriented Curriculum of Hong Kong (TOC) (cf. 5.7). The ALL Guidelines provide a comprehensive assessment scheme for formative and summative assessment through the use of performance indicators for the assessment of content (i.e. the complexity of the activity) and the quality of performance (as indicated for each of the aims of language learning). Criteria for performance assessment of each one of the different task-types are also provided. The integration of all these criteria may, however, be cumbersome and a similar assessment format has been considerably simplified and integrated in the TOC (cf. 5.7).

The Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) of Hong Kong (cf. 5.7) provides the most useful aspects for incorporation into a task-based language syllabus for South Africa. It makes a distinction between aims and objectives through dimension targets and skill outcomes. Tasks are described in terms of dimension targets, task procedures (methodological indicators), text-types, vocabulary, language items and communicative functions, skill outcomes and attitudes. Tasks are recycled to facilitate cognitive restructuring.

Although the TOC system accommodates pupil mobility and individualised assessment (cf. 5.7) and is the ideal one, it may be too sophisticated for the South African education system. The constraints of the South African system (such as poor teacher qualifications, poor infrastructure in some areas etc.) prohibit the use of a sophisticated placement and assessment system at the moment (cf. 6.3). The assessment schemes of the TOC integrate target dimensions, pupil performance and performance criteria to produce a profile of pupil progress. Although the use of marks is discouraged in the TOC (cf. 5.7), the syllabus provides examples of how pupils' progress can be indicated in a Band of Performance (BoP) and then be converted to marks. Such a conversion procedure is suggested for South Africa.

The following syllabuses are good examples of task-based language syllabuses and components from them are included in a framework for a task-based language syllabus for South Africa:

- The Alabama syllabus provides the teacher with a generic pupil profile of every grade that enables the teacher to conceptualise the learner group and makes it easier to identify and implement themes and topics that the pupils find relevant and interesting.
- The Australian Language Levels project is a good example of a task-based language syllabus, because it is comprehensive and it integrates theory, syllabus design and classroom practice. It provides teachers with theoretical underpinnings as well as comprehensive lists of examples. Its comprehensiveness may, however, be cumbersome to teachers who are poorly qualified.
- The Target Oriented Curriculum of Hong Kong on the other hand, is much more user-friendly, as it provides the principles of task-based language learning in a comprehensive, yet compact and teacher-friendly format. It indicates the integrated aims, objectives, content, teaching and learning opportunities and assessment in such a way that the teacher can implement the syllabus.

In Chapter 6 ESL primary school classrooms in South Africa are discussed. The following aspects need to be taken into consideration in a proposal for a task-based language syllabus:

- The present syllabus describes objectives in terms of tasks and activities, but these are not used as organising units; the language skills are used as units of analysis. These skills are described for phases of learning, e.g. the Senior Primary Phase (cf. 6.2), but there is not enough guidance on how the syllabus should be integrated and implemented for every year group. The lack of sufficient scaffolding for teachers to interpret the syllabus leads to unsatisfactory syllabus implementation (cf. 6.3).
- When implementing a language syllabus, practitioners should take heed of the socio-economic background of pupils. In South Africa many pupils come from disadvantaged and incomplete family structures (cf. 6.3). Language development is often limited, yet many of these pupils often attend English MOI schools. These pupils need to be prepared for English across the curriculum, but no such guidelines occur in the present syllabus. The content for pupils who have English as subject only is often over-used (cf. 6.3.2); partly because there aren't developmental pupil profiles in the present syllabus. The context of English MOI schools necessitates the preparation of pupils for CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) and BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills), whereas pupils who have English as subject only probably need BICS more than CALP (depending on the context).
- many teachers in South Africa are not proficient in English. Many teachers are also poorly qualified and demotivated, due to various factors (cf. 6.3.4). The low level of training of many ESL teachers in South Africa necessitates a syllabus that provides enough scaffolding, yet does not restrict teachers unnecessarily. The syllabus cannot be too complicated or too long either, as teachers often lack the skills to interpret or implement complicated materials. These constraints have to be taken into account when planning a syllabus.

The design of tasks forms the core of a task-based language syllabus and needs to be considered in the next section.

7.3 A GENERATIVE MODEL FOR TASK DESIGN

If a task-based language syllabus is to be designed, a model for task design is required. A multi-dimensional generative model for task design is proposed by Clark (1996:266). The components of his model ensure that a variety of tasks can be designed that will eventually be included in a task bank that is available for teacher implementation. His model consists of three dimensions, namely the knowledge-using dimension, the language-using dimension and task dimensions which are integrated.

The knowledge-using dimension includes the metacognitive, conceptual, procedural and representational dimensions (cf. 2.3.3.1).

The language-using dimension consists of the dimensions of language use (interpersonal, knowledge and experience) (cf. 2.3.3.1) and the genres associated with them. Clark (1996:264) proposes tasks that involve communicative gaps, e.g. information gap, opinion gap, decision-making gap, problem-solving gap, service-getting gap and imagination gap tasks that necessitate discourse of an unpredictable nature and a resultant straining of the participants' existing resources. These tasks may be open-ended or closed language-using opportunities. The communication involved may be individual (through internalised use of language for thinking), one way, two way or multi-participant in nature.

The task dimensions include purposes/goals (e.g. 'finding out', 'calculating'), contexts of the target language culture (e.g. home, school, leisure), topics within subject areas (e.g. Geography), topics associated with the target language culture, topics associated with the themes and student-generated topics, processes (that is divided into executing process, like interpreting, goal-setting and planning and learning processes,

like investigating, problem-solving and reasoning) and products (that is divided into task products, like a report and learning products like, solutions or new knowledge).

Clark's model is based on his experience with the Target Oriented Curriculum of Hong Kong. It is detailed and comprehensive, and it provides structured scaffolding for the task designer. It has to be borne in mind that South African circumstances (cf. 6.2 and 6.3) necessitate a less complex model, because most teachers are not proficient in English and are poorly qualified.

The model that is proposed in this thesis is based on only three major components, namely the purposes, processes and products of the task. Each of these components contains sub-components that describe in detail what the component consists of. All of Clark's dimensions are accommodated within the major components.

Under the *purposes* of task design, tasks are divided into real-life tasks (tasks that may generate knowledge that can be utilised in the short term, e.g. asking the price of a sweet) or pedagogic tasks (tasks that may generate knowledge that serves as a foundation for later learning, e.g. identifying the main idea). Pedagogic tasks may involve tasks that are less likely to occur outside the classroom, e.g. identifying the main idea of a passage. Communication gap tasks, e.g. reasoning-gap and problem-solving gap tasks, should be used for both real-life and pedagogic tasks. Tasks are selected on micro-level (i.e. classroom selection of content) to include suitable themes and topics (from subject areas, themes, pupil-generated and the target culture), contexts (derived from text-types) and vocabulary generated by the selected themes, topics and text-types.

The *process* of learning involves the strategies that pupils use to learn. The inclusion of learning strategies in the learning process encourages pupils to flex their strategies. During the learning process, both fluency and accuracy skills need to be

developed. Improved capability or proficiency is described in terms of conceptual, procedural and representational knowledge (cf. 2.3.3.1). This may be achieved through skill outcomes. While the tasks focus pupils on meaning, their attention may be drawn to aspects of language form and communicative functions. This may be done through focusing or consciousness-raising activities (like exercises and explanations). Different resources (text-types and media) may be used to teach aspects of fluency and accuracy.

The *learning products* are described in terms of dimension targets. These are holistic outcomes in terms of the dimensions of language use, e.g. Knowledge Dimension (Key Stage 2) - to provide or find out, organise and present information on familiar topics. These outcomes are also contextually bound (home, school, family, etc.). Products indicate what pupils can do with language at differing levels of capability. The three components are represented in Figure 4.

Affective factors relate to all aspects of learning. Pupils need to see the relevance of learning English, the process of learning should not create negative learning experiences and the products of learning should serve as renewed motivation for ever-increasing capability.

The tasks, therefore, consist of multi-dimensional components of content and teaching-learning opportunities.

TASK DESIGN FOR AN ESL SYLLABUS

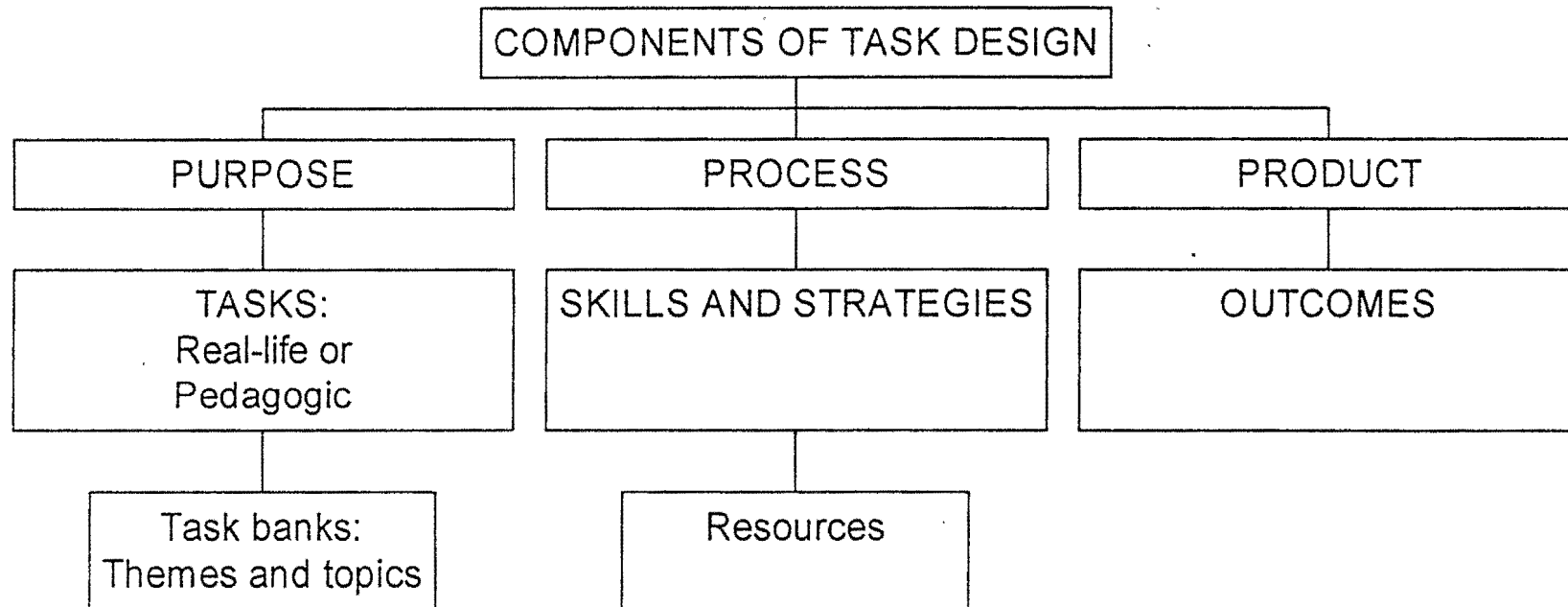


Figure 15: A generative model for task design

7.4 A FRAMEWORK FOR A TASK-BASED SYLLABUS

The proposed task-based syllabus for English Second Language in South African primary schools, therefore, has the following components:

- a situation analysis;
- aims described in terms of dimension outcomes;
- content and teaching-learning opportunities:
 - * themes;
 - * vocabulary;
 - * resources: text-types;
 - media;
 - * language forms and communicative functions;
 - * skills;
 - * strategies;
 - * affective factors;
- assessment, and
- evaluation.

The theoretical division between content and teaching-learning opportunities disappear and they become one and the same thing (cf. 4.4.3). Nunan (1989:15) says in this regard:

...the distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes difficult to sustain: one needs not only to specify both the content (or ends of learning) and the tasks (or means to those ends) but also to integrate them. This suggests a broad perspective on curriculum in which concurrent consideration is given to content, methodology and evaluation.

The elements of content and teaching-learning opportunities constitute a 'task' in the proposed framework.

The components of the proposed model are discussed in the next

section.

7.4.1 The situation analysis

The situation analysis needs to reflect the current situation. The realities of the South African situation, such as the government policy, the pupils (e.g. their needs, backgrounds and profiles), the contexts (e.g. classroom constraints) and the teachers (e.g. their qualifications, proficiency and abilities) should be taken into consideration. All these aspects are addressed in the preceding chapters of this study.

7.4.2 Aims and objectives

In keeping with the planned Outcomes-based Education (OBE) of the Department of Education, the aims and objectives in the proposed syllabus are described in terms of targets as well as outcomes.

The target of the ESL course at primary school level is to improve the pupils' capability to use English in order to meet immediate and later demands for Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (cf. 7.1). The primary school course lays the foundation for later learning.

Aims are described in terms of dimension targets (cf. 3.3.1). This is done in order to ensure that the emphasis falls on holistic tasks, rather than sub-tasks. The three dimensions describe the purposes of using English, and they are:

- the knowledge dimension;
- the interpersonal dimension, and
- the experience dimension.

Within the three dimensions or purposes of language use, the pupil progresses towards an ever-improving capability in using English.

In keeping with the policy of the Department of Education, objectives are described in terms of skill outcomes for every grade.

7.4.3 Content and teaching-learning opportunities

These form the core of the syllabus and are formulated in terms of tasks. Various components make up the task descriptions. These occur in task banks that may be used by teachers.

Tasks will give an indication of themes and topics (cf. 2.3.1.2.1), vocabulary (cf. 2.2.6 and 2.3.1.3.2), resources (text-types and media) (cf. 2.5.4), language forms and communicative functions (cf. 2.4.3.2), skills (cf. 2.3.3.3), strategies (cf. 2.3.1.3.2) and affective factors (cf. 2.3.1.2) for each grade.

7.4.4 Assessment

Criteria for assessment are given according to which the teacher can assess pupil performance for that grade. Two types of assessment are used, namely formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment indicates pupil performance during the period that the pupil develops to end-of-grade or summative assessment. Specific criteria are used for task assessment. The assessment of holistic tasks, after task completion, is preferred to assessment of sub-tasks. Assessment is integrated to show the relation between dimension targets, pupil performance and performance criteria (cf. 5.7).

7.5 Conclusion

In the light of the realities and constraints of the South African situation, the proposed syllabus needs to be comprehensive, yet explicit and concise enough to allow teachers to grasp its content at a glance. It needs to integrate the relevant theoretical bases of task-based language without taxing

the teacher excessively. The teacher needs examples of how to integrate the variables, without feeling that the syllabus is overly prescriptive and restrictive.

All aspects of the syllabus are interrelated. The purposes, processes and products cannot be separated.

The principles outlined in this chapter need to be applied in practice. A core syllabus for the Senior Primary (Grade 3 - Grade 6) is proposed in the next chapter. The implementation of the core syllabus for Grade 6 will be demonstrated. Finally an integrated lesson for sixth Graders will be demonstrated.