

The Lexical Syllabus; Dave Willis

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CHAPTER 1: From methodological options to syllabus design

Syllabus and methodology

It is tempting to see syllabus design and methodology as discrete options. The syllabus specifies what is to be learned and the methodology tells us how it is to be learned. It seems that there need be no conflict between the two. We can specify a syllabus in whatever way seems sensible, and can then use whatever methodology we want in order to transmit our syllabus content. Unfortunately, in recent years there has been conflict between syllabus and methodology. The failure to recognise this conflict has on occasions led to a good deal of confusion.

There is general agreement nowadays that people learn a language best by actually using the language to achieve real meanings and achieve real outcomes. This belief has brought into the classroom a wide range of activities designed to promote language use - role play, games playing and problem solving activities for example. These activities are contrasted with activities which involve manipulating language in ways which do not involve any exchange of meaning. Listening and repeating, transformation exercises and controlled pattern practice are activities which involve the production of language but not the use of language.

This emphasis on language use has obliged us to look carefully at the content of language courses in terms of topics and activities. The best way to ensure that learners really use language is to put them in a situation which makes them want to use language. We must catch their interest in some way, or present them with a challenge they feel motivated to meet. They will then be predisposed to use language in order to communicate their interest or to meet the challenge of a game or problem.

There are, then, at least two kinds of language production as part of the learning process in the classroom. At times people produce language in order to communicate. At other times they produce language simply in order to practise correct forms, or to demonstrate that they can produce a correct form. This may seem to be a straightforward distinction, but at times it can cause confusion in the classroom.

Here is an example from some actual classroom data (J R Willis 1981). The teacher has worked very hard to set up a situation in which students are to practise a number of verbs followed by the gerund form -ing. She tells one student:

Antonio, ask Socoop if he likes being a father.

Antonio says:

Socoop, do you like being a father?

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Socoop replies:

Yes, I erm . . . I am father of four children.

By standards operating outside the classroom this is a perfectly reasonable reply. It is also, as it happens, an acceptable sentence of English. The teacher, however, is not satisfied with this reply. She says:

Yes, all right, listen to the question though.

Socoop listens to the question and then tries a series of replies without real success until the teacher resolves the issue by answering for him:

Yes, I do. I *like being* a father.

The learners do not challenge the truth of the teacher's utterance, even though the teacher is a woman, because they know it is not a real statement intended to communicate something about the teacher's attitude to parenthood. It is simply the teacher correcting Socoop and giving him a model of the target pattern. Socoop's mistake, of course, was to behave as if the question he was asked was a real question, and as if he really was expected to explain to the class his feelings about fatherhood.

McTear (1975) gives a similar example:

Teacher: Where are you from?

Students: We're from Venezuela . . .

Teacher: No. Say the sentence: Where are you from?

Students: Where are you from?

Here again the students imagine that the teacher is asking a real question whereas in fact the teacher is simply giving them a model to follow. The literature on classroom research is full of misunderstandings of this sort, where an utterance is taken as having some communicative value, when in fact it is simply intended as a sample of language for the learners to copy or manipulate in some way, usually by repeating word for word or by producing another sentence incorporating a similar pattern. Unfortunately, it is not only learners who are sometimes confused about the nature and purpose of language produced in the classroom.

Most teachers nowadays would claim that their approach to teaching rests, as I have already said, on the belief that we best learn a language by using that language rather than simply by producing samples of it for the teacher's inspection and correction. Broadly speaking such an approach is referred to as communicative, since it is based on the use of language to communicate. Even if a language programme is based on a grammatical syllabus, it may be described as communicative on the grounds that it rests on a communicative methodology. But what if there is, as I have claimed, a conflict between syllabus and methodology?

I believe that such a conflict is revealed in attempts to harness a communicative methodology to a grammatical or structural syllabus. The syllabus aims are expressed as a series of language patterns with their associated meanings. The aim of each unit is that by the end the learner should have mastered the prescribed pattern or patterns. One methodology which might realise such a

syllabus is based on a three stage cycle involving presentation, practice and production. The aim of this methodological cycle is to lead students towards control of a particular pattern in English which is based on the structure of the clause or the sentence. The pattern is intended either as an illustration of some aspect of English grammar, or as the realisation of some communicative function.

At the presentation stage the teacher contextualises and models a target form - a clause or sentence pattern - and students are required to produce that form under close teacher control. Care is taken to see that learners understand the pattern they are about to practise. Once the meaning is clear, the cycle moves on to the practice stage. There is a range of techniques which might be used at this stage. Students may be required to reply to a question taking care to use a sentence of the appropriate form; or they may be asked to respond to some other stimulus whereby they transform or expand a given utterance into one with the appropriate form.

The presentation stage of the lesson is at first very tightly under the teacher's control. A very common way of accomplishing this stage is for the teacher to ask a series of questions which the students answer using the target pattern. If, for example, the target is the present continuous used with future reference, as in:

A: What are you doing tomorrow?

B: Well, in the morning I'm playing tennis.

the teacher may ask a series of questions like:

What are you doing after tennis?

What are you doing in the afternoon?

and so on. The content of the students' answers may be controlled, for example by the use of a series of flashcards:

Teacher: What are you doing tomorrow?

(Shows picture of people playing tennis.)

Learner: I'm playing tennis.

Teacher: Good. And what are you doing at the weekend.

(Shows picture of a cinema queue.)

Learner: I'm going to the cinema.

Gradually the control of content is relinquished as the lesson moves into the practice stage. Learners may, for example, be expected to give true answers to the teacher's questions. But the teacher still hovers in the background to ensure that the language produced is relevant to the aim of the lesson - the accurate production of the target form. The purpose of the activity is not simply to give learners the chance to talk about what they are planning to do at some time in the future. It is, quite specifically, to give them opportunities to use the present continuous tense.

In the presentation and practice stages, then, the focus of attention is very much on the form of the language which is to be produced. It might be argued that there is a focus on meaning too. But meaning implies choice, and the purpose of presentation and practice is to restrict choice. In the lesson above, the

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'right' answer to:

What are you doing tomorrow?
is not:

I don't know. I might play tennis.

or:

I'll probably play tennis if the weather's okay.

or:

I'm going to play tennis.

The 'right' answer is:

I'm playing tennis.

This is because the focus of the activity is not really on the content of the language, the meanings that are being exchanged. The real focus is on the form of the utterances used to realise those meanings.

Presumably, then, it is at the production stage that learners are involved in real language use. The first two stages have an enabling role. They provide students with the language they will need in the production stage. But what is it that is to be produced? If, as the label implies, the purpose of this stage is to produce the target form, then what we have is yet another form-focused activity. The intention may be that the production of the target form is subordinate to some other activity, a role play or problem solving exercise for example. But if learners are predisposed to produce specific forms of the language, then it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the activity is one which focuses on form and on formal accuracy. During the presentation and practice stages, learners have been encouraged to give the 'correct' response to the question - correct in that it incorporates the form under study. In the same way during the production stage learners will be strongly predisposed to produce the target form. In the example I have given they will be predisposed to make statements about the future not by using the modal **will** or **might** or by using **going to**, but by using the present continuous, irrespective of the meaning they wish to convey. In other words learners will have a mental set such that form takes priority over meaning. When it comes to talking about the future in a classroom context, the focus of the production stage is very much on form.

Sometimes this predisposition on the part of the learners is reinforced by the teacher and the materials used. Learners may be encouraged to 'try to use phrases like these'. They will then only be regarded as having performed successfully if they do indeed produce the forms which have just been presented and practised and if they fail initially to do this the teacher will intervene to ensure conformity. Socoop made the mistake of assuming that he was being asked a real question, and he had to be corrected by the teacher. In the same way a learner who fails to produce the present continuous after the kind of presentation and practice stages we have described may be 'corrected' by the teacher. It is easy to drift into a situation in which the main purpose of the pro-

duction stage is not to exchange meanings but to produce the target form. In spite of this, there is sometimes a claim that this kind of methodology is in some way communicative. Littlewood (1981) outlines a sequence based very much on presentation, practice and production in which he subsumes presentation and practice under 'pre-communicative activities', leading up to 'communicative activities' corresponding to the production stage:

Through pre-communicative activities, the teacher isolates specific elements of knowledge or skill which compose communicative ability, and provides the learners with opportunities to practise them separately . . . In communicative activities, the learner has to activate and integrate his pre-communicative knowledge and skills, in order to use them for the communication of meanings. He is now engaged in practising the total skill of communication. (Littlewood 1981)

Littlewood suggests that the normal sequencing will be for teachers to provide input in the form of a form-focused pre-communicative activity, and to follow this with a communicative activity 'during which the learners can use the new language they have acquired and the teacher can monitor their progress'. But if the purpose of the so-called communicative activities is for students to demonstrate control of the newly introduced language forms, how does the teacher 'monitor their progress'? Presumably by listening to see if they do indeed incorporate the target form, and additionally to see if they produce it accurately.

It is difficult to see how such activities can be regarded as truly communicative if the learners' main object is not to achieve some outcome through the use of language, but to demonstrate to the teacher their control of a target form. True communication involves the achievement of some outcome through the use of language, and demands that the language used should be determined by the attempt to achieve that outcome. In the kind of communication described by Littlewood, the so-called communicative activity is simply an opportunity to use a particular form and the language used is conditioned by this.

There is, therefore, a tension, perhaps a basic contradiction, between a grammatical or structural syllabus and a communicative methodology. A grammatical syllabus demands a methodology which focuses on the correct production of target forms. It is form-focused. A communicative methodology, if it involves real communication, demands that learners use whatever language best achieves the desired outcome of the communicative activity. There is no real sense in which the presentation and practice stages described above can be called communicative, because they restrict the freedom to use whatever forms best realise communicative intent. Learners are not able to choose whatever forms best realise the meanings they want to realise, but rather have to use the forms that have been identified and prescribed for them by their teacher.

At the production stage teacher and learner have two options. The purpose of the stage may be for learners to produce the target form. If this is the case then communication has been subordinated to the primary goal, which is to rehearse the use of a particular form. The other option is for them to see this last stage as free. Learners use whatever language they want in order to achieve the desired communicative outcome or intention. But if they do this we can

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hardly speak of a 'production' stage, because we can no longer say what it is that is to be produced and we can no longer point to a link between the activity and the syllabus.

Sometimes a claim to a 'communicative' approach rests on syllabus specification rather than methodology. Many language teaching programmes take a notional-functional or 'communicative' syllabus as their starting point. Such a syllabus, like the Council of Europe Threshold Syllabus, is seen as communicative because it consists of an inventory of units of communication rather than an inventory of sentence patterns. It has units entitled 'Making Requests' and 'Cause and Effect', so it is concerned with what is to be communicated rather than with how it is to be communicated. In this case one would expect to match the syllabus statement with a communicative methodology.

But the communicative syllabus based on specified notions and functions does not really consist of such communicative units. Those units are the abstract categories on which the syllabus is based, but these categories are realised by a set of sentence patterns. The real syllabus is an inventory of such patterns. Thus the unit on requests may cover the models **would** and **could** in patterns like:

Could you open the window please.

The methodology which is usually associated with such a syllabus is a presentation methodology of the kind I have described above. It depends on learners producing the target pattern rather than encoding requests in whatever way seems to be most appropriate. It is not 'communicative' because it does not involve learning through use.

It seems, therefore, that syllabus and methodology are not discrete options. If we choose a syllabus which specifies an inventory of language forms, it is difficult to see how we can achieve this syllabus by means of a communicative methodology. And if we want to use a communicative methodology in which learners use language freely, it is difficult to see how we can then specify what language forms will be covered by this methodology.

One response to this conflict is to adopt an eclectic approach. For example the syllabus may be defined linguistically as an inventory of language structures, and realised through a presentation and practice methodology. This methodology may then be supplemented by giving learners ample opportunity to use language freely to enable them to consolidate and extend what they have been taught. This is what underlies Brumfit's (1984) recommendation that a language learning programme should offer a balance of activities, some of which focus on accuracy and some on fluency. There is a focus on accuracy when learners are concerned with the form of the language they produce, and on fluency when they are concerned with exchanging meanings and achieving outcomes.

One could achieve this double focus by operating with a structural syllabus realised through a presentation and practice methodology, and by having in parallel a series of activities which encourage learners to use language. This would not be a production stage but a discrete series of activities, so that learners did not feel constrained to 'produce' any particular form, but simply to communicate as best they could with whatever language they could command.

However, an eclectic approach of this kind skirts around the problem of reconciling a syllabus specified in linguistic terms with a methodology based on language use. There is no serious attempt to ensure that there is a real relationship between the language syllabus, realised by controlled activities, and the communicative activities. Presumably one would hope that there would be a good chance that in the communicative activities learners would use at least some of the language that had been presented and practised, even if one did not judge success simply in terms of what language was produced and how accurately. But this does not provide more than a tenuous link between syllabus and fluency activities.

I have argued up to now that there are potential conflicts between the way we specify a syllabus and the way we realise that syllabus. I have argued that there is a basic dichotomy in the language classroom between activities which focus on form and activities which focus on outcome and the exchange of meanings. I have suggested that we need to be clear about the relationship between syllabus specification and methodology. I have also suggested that the choices involved are concerned crucially with the way language is used in classrooms - whether the focus is primarily on language form or on language as a means of communication.

Grammar in the classroom

Rutherford (1987) is highly critical of the view of language enshrined in a presentation methodology. He argues that this approach to language learning regards the process as one of 'accumulated entities'. According to this view learners gradually amass a sequence of parts. At intervals their proficiency in the language is measured by determining what parts and how many parts they have accumulated. Rutherford argues that most commercially produced foreign language textbooks reflect this view, an indication that it is a view widely held in the language teaching profession. The associated methodology is based on:

. . . the discovery of a target language whose structure has been analysed into its putative constituent parts, the separate parts thus serving as units of pedagogical content, focus, practice and eventual mastery. (Rutherford 1987)

The danger with an approach of this kind is that it trivialises grammar, and trivialises language description in general. It does give recipes for the construction of some clauses and sentences, and for the production of samples of language. But the grammar of a language is not a set of clauses and sentences. It is the systematic relationship between meaning and form which underlies the production of grammatical clauses and sentences. It is useful to acquire samples of language only in so far as those samples lead us towards insights into the underlying system.

Language behaviour is highly systematic. We produce language in accordance with a complex system of rules. Most people, even though they are successful language users, are quite unable to give anything but the most rudimentary statements about how that system works. They can make statements about whether or not something 'sounds all right', but find it very difficult to

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explain these decisions. Most native speakers would have no doubts that the sentences:

John is being silly.

and:

John is being careful.

are grammatically acceptable. Equally most native speakers would have doubts about the sentences:

John is being tall.

and:

John is being handsome.

Silly and **careful** belong to a class of adjectives often referred to as dynamic. They are used to describe someone's behaviour rather than their inherent attributes. Dynamic adjectives, such as **awkward**, **mischievous**, **kind** and **cruel**, are regularly used with the present continuous, whereas other adjectives which are stative are not. This is a rule which all native speakers operate but very few would be able to explain.

There is a difference then, between a user's grammar and a grammatical description. A user's grammar is an internalised system, the operational system underlying our language behaviour. We normally operate the system unconsciously and are quite unable to explain it. A grammatical description is an attempt to characterise that behaviour, and to identify the categories and concepts on which it rests (categories like *adjective*, *dynamic* and *stative*).

Prabhu (1987) argues, like Rutherford, that most approaches to language teaching are based on 'internalisation of the grammatical system through planned progression, pre-selection and form-focused activity'. In other words there is a description of the language which is communicated to the learners bit by bit by revealing to them samples of the language in a predetermined order. Prabhu claims that such an approach is based on a number of quite false assumptions.

The most basic of these assumptions is that we have a description of grammar which is adequate to this task. The user's grammar is and always will be, more complex than any descriptive grammar. Indeed attempts to describe the grammar simply showed:

. . . that the internal grammatical system operated subconsciously by fluent speakers was vastly more complex than was reflected by or could be incorporated into any grammatical syllabus- so complex and inaccessible to consciousness in fact, that no grammar yet constructed by linguists was able to account for it fully.

However much we may wish to, we simply cannot give the learner a description of the language which works. It must follow that if our pedagogic description of the language is inadequate, then in order to learn the language the learner must operate learning strategies which do not depend on a grammatical description of the language. There must be important and subtle insights into the structure of language which learners are able to make quite unaided.

A look at most coursebooks will confirm that the number of patterns actually brought directly to the attention of learners does not go very far towards a com-

prehensive grammar of English. Fortunately learners are able to transcend or, perhaps more accurately, to by-pass the grammar that is presented to them and to go beyond it. They begin, for example, to use the present perfect tense with reference to future time in sentences like:

Please let me know as soon as you *have fixed* your travel plans.

I'll come round later if *I've finished* what I have to do.

even though this particular use is hardly ever presented in coursebooks. They learn, as we shall see later, that the word *any* and its compounds are used in affirmative sentences like:

Anything you can do I can do better.

Come round any time.

even though they may have been taught quite explicitly that *any* is used only in negative and interrogative sentences. We should ask very seriously how it is that learners are able to go beyond what they are taught in this way. An obvious possibility is that they learn a good deal for themselves from the language that they read and hear. They do not need to be taught, because they have an innate ability to generalise from the language they read and hear in order to build up and refine a workable grammatical system.

It is also difficult to see how the learner can move from an inventory of discrete patterns towards important generalisations about the grammar of the language. We have already pointed out that there is much more to language than a series of structures which can be presented to a learner. We can present, for example, the pattern which is commonly, though misleadingly, called the first conditional:

If it *rains* we will get wet.

This pattern is regarded as difficult, and therefore worth presenting to students, because the use of the present simple tense with reference to future time causes particular problems. But this is a feature of the so-called present tense, not simply of the first conditional. The present tense is commonly used with future reference in temporal clauses:

It'll be quite late when we arrive.

and after verbs like *hope*:

I hope somebody is there to meet you when you arrive.

The same use is common in other subordinate clauses:

There will be a prize for the one who *finishes* first.

The present tense is an option when the future is already fixed or arranged. I recently had a conversation trying to arrange a meeting involving a number of people. One of the participants turned down a proposed date saying:

I'm sorry, *I'm* in Bhutan.

This was obviously not a reference to present time since we were in a British university at the time. It was a reference to future time and was acknowledged

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by another participant:

Oh, yes. When do you go?

Drilling or repeating the first conditional pattern may show a learner that this is an acceptable pattern of English, and the pattern may eventually be incorporated in the learner's language. But it tells the learner nothing of great value about the grammar of the present tense. Indeed, by implying that there is something unusual about this use of the tense and that this unusual feature is associated with the conditional, it is actually getting in the way of learners developing a more complete description of the present tense and realising that 'the present simple tense is neither present nor simple' (Lewis 1989).

There is also an assumption on the part of those who present language to the learner that the learner is actually in a position to receive what is presented, that we can specify what will be learned and in what order. This again flies in the face of our experience as teachers. We know very well that it will be a long long time before learners distinguish consistently between, for example, the present perfect and past simple forms of the verb. We may 'present' some version of this distinction but it will not immediately become part of the learner's language behaviour. A learner may ignore the distinction altogether or may operate it only in a few instances. It will be a long time before the learner has any control of this part of the verb system of English. We cannot realistically hope to present the learner with usable information in this way. All we can realistically do is attempt to make the learner aware that these concepts and these distinctions are a part of the grammar of English. Whether and at what point the learner will be able to act on that information is beyond our control.

If we are to help learners to acquire the grammar of the language in the sense of an operating system, we must begin by acknowledging that we can only do this indirectly. We may be able to offer useful hints, but we cannot begin to offer a full description of the language. We may be able to devise activities which will help learners internalise the grammar of the language for themselves, but we cannot present them with usable chunks of language. A methodology should take account of the fact that any pedagogic grammar will be inadequate, that what is presented will not necessarily be received and, most important of all, that the crucial participant in the attempt to internalise a grammar is not the teacher or the materials but the learner.

Use and usage

Even if we were able to teach the grammatical system effectively, there is no guarantee that this would be translated into an ability to use the target language. Widdowson (1978) argues that a methodology which focuses simply on language form is deficient in that it is concerned simply with enabling students to produce correct sentences. He feels that the ability to use language involves more than just the ability to produce grammatical sentences.

Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to communicative effect. (Widdowson 1978)

At first sight this may seem to be a highly artificial distinction. How can someone know how to 'understand, speak, read and write sentences' without being able to use these sentences to communicative effect?

It seems to me that there are two ways in which this can happen. The first is probably familiar to very many of us who have learned a foreign language. We can work out the meaning of a spoken sentence and perhaps reply to that sentence, but only if we are given time to process the language involved. Given time we can do a lot with the language, but under the kind of time pressure which usually accompanies language use we just cannot get things together. There is a sense in which we know the language in that we know what the forms mean and we know what forms we want to produce. But there is another sense in which we do not know the language. We cannot get things together with sufficient speed and confidence to use the language when we are required to do so. We have a knowledge of the forms, but we do not have the kind of fluent control demanded in real communication.

There is a second sense in which we may be said to 'know' the language and at the same time not to know it. We can produce and understand acceptable sentences in the target language, but we are not sure in what circumstances these sentences would be appropriate as tokens of communication, and we are not sure how we would deploy them in communicative discourse. This is what Widdowson has in mind.

Take, for example, an English speaker who has a good knowledge of French grammar and lexis and who then tries to put this knowledge to use in writing a business letter in French. The letter would be unlikely to create a favourable impression in a French reader. The conventions of letter writing in French are quite different from those in English, and if the words and phrases are translated directly into English they sound elaborate and ornate to an English ear. Similarly, the direct equivalent of an English letter might sound abrupt and dismissive to a French speaker. We all have to learn the conventions of certain types of communication in our own language, even though we have a sophisticated knowledge of the grammar and lexis. We have to do the same in a foreign language.

We must also learn how to deploy sentences in discourse. There is a phrase in English which seems to have become very common in recent years. The phrase is 'Having said that...', and it is used to introduce some modification or something which partly contradicts what has just been said. There is nothing in the meaning of the phrase 'Having said that. ..' which can be gleaned from its lexis and grammar to give us any indication of its use. We have to know what value it has in discourse, how it is used to structure what follows.

Widdowson develops a distinction between language as a lexico-grammatical system, which he refers to as language usage, and language as used for communication, which he refers to as language use. One of his conclusions is that we need to take much more account in our teaching strategies of language use. But the problem here is that we know very little about language use. We do not, he argues, have any adequate description of language use. We do not know enough about the conventions of communication and about the way phrases, clauses and sentences come to have a value quite separate from that of their component parts.

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It must be stressed that the study of language in use is still in its early stages: we know very little at present about such matters as the way discourse develops and the way different rhetorical activities are to be characterised. There is no source of reference for the teaching of use as there is for the teaching of usage. In these circumstances it is prudent not to be too positive in one's recommendation.
(Widdowson 1978)

This is true in the sense that we do not have an accepted model for the analysis and description of discourse or for the classification and characterisation of rhetorical activities. But we can still look at language in use and encourage learners to make generalisations about it. One thing, however, is sure. If we are to study language in use, then what we must study is language in use. This is a tautology, but it is one which is often brushed aside:

. . . there has been for many years in English teaching a loss of respect for the natural patterns of a language. Because of the difficulty of analysing language that occurs in everyday contexts, teachers have got in the way of accepting all sorts of invented or adapted texts. These are grimly defended by some, but there is no virtue in them; they were only made up because it was not practicable to harness real language. (Sinclair 1988)

Approaches which focus primarily on the form of a simplified and idealised 'language' are indeed unlikely to take us anywhere near the study of language in use. If we are to study language in use then we must study real language designed to serve some communicative purpose, rather than language simply designed to illustrate aspects of usage. But a methodology based on presentation and practice is not equipped to handle problems of use. As we have seen, the language involved is not being used. Socoop's teacher, for example, when she says:

Yes, I do. I like being a father.

is not seen as expressing how she feels about fatherhood. Presentation and practice are concerned purely and simply with usage.

The production stage following presentation and practice is also concerned primarily with usage. When learners produce the present continuous with future reference, their decision to use this form is not based on criteria of use. They do not choose this form because it is the form which best expresses the meaning they want to express. They produce the form to demonstrate their familiarity with the aspect of usage which is the focus of that particular lesson. Once learning targets have been specified in terms of form learners are predisposed to usage rather than use.

Use and usage in the classroom context

To a large extent the presentation methodology I have described above has replaced the old grammar-translation approach. Grammar-translation was characterised by a good deal of explanatory talk in the learner's first language,

with relatively little production of the target language on the part of either teacher or learners. One of the features of presentation, practice and production is that there is a great deal of the target language produced in the classroom, and perhaps this is the reason for its relative success.

If you observe very carefully a lesson based on presentation, or, even better, if you look at transcripts of such lessons, you will probably notice two rather surprising things. You will probably see that there is a lot of language produced in addition to the language that presents and practises the target form. One reason is that teachers use a lot of language to organise the lesson. They are constantly giving instructions and explanations to give structure to the lesson and make sure that learners know what is expected of them. Another reason is that a language lesson is a social event. There is more to it than simply learning a language. Teachers and learners greet each other, tell stories, make jokes, get to know one another and do all the other things that contribute to an easy social atmosphere.

Another thing you will notice about the language in a classroom, particularly in an elementary classroom, is that teachers produce a lot of language which is beyond the level the learners are supposed to have reached. They do not, indeed they cannot, restrict themselves to the very limited language which has already been presented. A teacher might well begin a lesson, even at the elementary stage, by saying:

Okay, Unit 6. Could you turn to Unit 6? Right, Andreas, what about the first picture? What's in the first picture?

This would be quite unremarkable teacher behaviour even if learners have not yet 'done' the modal could or the phrase 'What about . . . ?'

By the same token, learners manage to get across meanings which are beyond their target language resources. In the lesson featuring Socoop (see page 1) one of Socoop's classmates wanted to make the point that women often do jobs which are traditionally regarded as a man's prerogative:

Victoria: (A woman) . . . He works, he . . . she works . . .

Teacher: Yes.

Victoria: in sever(?) for her husband.

Teacher: Mm?

Victoria: He works teacher or, er engineering or many jobs, er, the sever in a man.

Teacher: The same.

Victoria: The same

Teacher: As a man. (J R Willis 1981)

One of the important things about the way a presentation methodology is realised by a sensitive teacher is that it is language rich. Learners are involved in a lot of language use. But, paradoxically, this is not a deliberate part of the methodology. It is very much a by-product of the methodology. But it would help to explain how learners learn a lot of language which has not been presented to them. It would also help to explain how in some cases, as in the case of any cited above (page 9), they may learn something very different from what has been presented to them.

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It is also important to remember that presentation and practice are only part of what happens in a language teaching programme. The eclectic approach referred to earlier (page 6) brings into the classroom activities involving listening and reading skills which give much more, and much more varied, exposure to language than does a well organised and controlled presentation-based lesson. It is also the case that such activities are much less likely to have an overt language focus in the sense of being targeted at a particular language form. In recent years such lessons have often been referred to as 'skills-based' lessons. Perhaps this is an acknowledgement of the fact that language use is a skill rather than a body of knowledge, and that the best way of acquiring a skill is by practising that skill. This is, in fact, another way of asserting the basic principle behind communicative methodology, that the best way to learn a language is by using it to communicate.

It is certainly true that language use in its various manifestations involves the application of skills. But those skills operate on language. If, for example, learners are being encouraged to predict the development of a text, they can, in the final event, do this only on the basis of their knowledge and experience of what words and phrases in texts are predictive and how they are predictive. To take an example quoted earlier, when they hear a speaker produce the phrase 'Having said that . . .', they are alerted to the fact that what follows is likely to introduce some contradiction or modification of what has been established so far.

It is likely, therefore, that the effectiveness of a skills-based approach to learning would be considerably enhanced if we could identify the linguistic knowledge on which particular skills operate. This takes us back to the need for a linguistic syllabus, and back to the contradiction that a linguistic syllabus is likely to lead to a focus on form rather than use, whereas the strength of skills-based activities is that they are based firmly in use.

I am arguing that the presentation of language forms does not provide sufficient input for learning a language. The grammatical system is much more complicated than we can possibly reflect in a methodology which claims to rely on the presentation of a very limited set of discrete patterns. In spite of this, a presentation methodology seems to work tolerably well. I am suggesting that this is partly because it is language rich. In spite of the fact that the methodology is based on presentation of samples of usage, the methodology succeeds because it provides a context in which there is a great deal of language use.

This brings us back to the uneasy relationship between syllabus specification and methodology. The syllabus specification must, directly or indirectly, consist of an inventory of language forms. I have suggested, however, that a successful methodology must rest on language use. The problem for a materials writer is to produce a specification of those language items which a learner is likely to need and then to match this with a methodology which involves a predominance of language use. We must look for a methodology which aims quite deliberately at language use rather than a methodology which offers language use as a by-product. We should try to devise a methodology which is based on using language in the classroom to exchange meanings and which also offers a focus on language form, rather than a methodology which focuses on language form and which only incidentally focuses on use.