

Procedural Syllabus, a Follow-up or an Alternative

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Abstract

Since its appearance in the 1970s Communicative Language Teaching has employed different types of syllabuses from Wilkins' Notional-Functional syllabus to Prabhu's Procedural, Breen's Process, and later task-based syllabuses. In the late 1970s Wilkins' syllabus was criticized, for it merely replaced a list of grammatical structures used in conventional syllabuses with a list of notions and functions. In the meantime, Prabhu developed a brand new syllabus which revolutionized the field of syllabus design and materials development. Procedural syllabus, as it was termed, was constructed around some problems, reflected in many a task, which required the learners to complete them in two different but consecutive stages, namely Pre-task and Task stages. Procedural syllabus was used in a project named the Bangalore after Bangalore, one of the institutes in which the study took place. The project involved a newly arrived approach to language teaching, the Communicational Teaching or CTP, which was based on the premise that language form can best be learnt when learner's attention is focused on meaning. Procedural syllabus was considered peculiar in that tasks (meaning-focused activities) constituted the syllabus. Information-gap, Reasoning-gap, and Opinion-gap activities were three categories into which these tasks were categorized.

Keywords: CTP, Procedural syllabus, Grammatical conformity, Pidginization, Incubation

1. Origin and Evolution

Since its arrival in the 1970s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has gone through three different phases, namely, “the Wilkins Period with the terms of notions and functions, the Munby Period with the needs analysis, and the Prabhu Period with the procedural, process, and task syllabus.” The Wilkins' period which was concerned with the idea of notional-functional syllabuses ended up with the criticism of these syllabuses as “merely replacing one kind of list such as a list of grammar items with another, i.e. a list of notions and functions, and therefore lacking a communicative process.” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:74)

The Prabhu Period which consists of procedural, process and task syllabuses is typified by the development of a particular task-based CLT, introduced by Prabhu himself, which was later titled the Procedural syllabus. Greenwood (1985) cites Johnson (1982) who defines procedural syllabus as “a syllabus of tasks which are graded conceptually and grouped by similarity”. Procedural syllabus is said to be a learning-centered approach in comparison to its earlier counterparts (Structural-Oral-Situational) in India which were more teaching-oriented. With the growing discontentment with the Structural-Oral-Situational method in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prabhu who was working at the Regional Institute of English in Bangalore at the time developed an approach which was called Communicational Teaching Project. Based on this approach, a project titled the Bangalore/Madras or the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project was undertaken in Southern India during which, 300 students ranging in age from 8 to 13 were taught by the method developed by Prabhu and his colleagues. Procedural syllabus was employed in this project as a successor to previously used syllabuses i.e. structural, notional-functional etc.

2. Underlying Theory

The hypothesis underlying the Bangalore project and procedural syllabus was that “language form is best learnt when the learner’s attention is focused on meaning.” More specifically, “grammar-construction by the learner is an unconscious process which is best facilitated by bringing about in the learner a preoccupation with meaning, saying or doing.” (Prabhu 1987: 147)

In this regard, Johnson & Johnson (1999) asserts that according to this hypothesis (language form is best learnt when the learner’s attention is focused on meaning.), “two consequences can follow. The first involves the abolition of any linguistic syllabus. If we truly wish for 'natural' classroom communication, then we cannot impose on the teaching any syllabus which preselects what language items will be focused on. Or, put another way, if we structure teaching around a linguistic syllabus, then we shall not achieve natural communication in the classroom. Prabhu therefore replaces the linguistic syllabus with a procedural syllabus or a syllabus of tasks. The second consequence of the central hypothesis is largely to eschew formal teaching procedures, like drilling and error correction, where the result would be FORM-FOCUS rather than MESSAGE-FOCUS (meaning-focus).” (Johnson & Johnson 1999: 266)

Accordingly in a procedural syllabus, there is no specification of vocabulary or structure items. That is, language items are not characterized in terms of structures, vocabulary items, notions, and functions. Rather some tasks which focus on meaning and are sequenced according to difficulty and grouped by similarity constitute this type of syllabus (Mohsenifar, 2008). These tasks engage the learner in thinking processes, the focus of which is completion of the tasks rather than learning linguistic forms. White maintains that “Such task-based teaching is intended to enable the learners to achieve grammatical conformity in their use of language which is believed to arise from the operation of some internal system of abstract rules or principles”. (White, 1988: 103)

This process of internal system-development is believed to go on at a subconscious level of learners’ minds and the system building will be activated or furthered by immediate needs to understand and express meaning but, once activated, it is capable of going beyond what is strictly called for by those immediate needs, achieving grammatical conformity in addition to communication. (Prabhu, 1987: 70)

The cognitive processes, triggered in students’ minds through task completion occur at two levels, namely Conscious and Unconscious. At the conscious level, meaning-building happens when meaning is understood or conveyed. While at the unconscious level, the system-building occurs when grammatical system is developed. Prabhu, in this regard states:

Task-based teaching operates with the concept that, while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning-content, some subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstracts or acquires some of the linguistic structuring embodied in these entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules. The intensive exposure caused by an effort to work out meaning-content is thus a condition which is favorable to the subconscious abstraction or cognitive formation of language structure. (Prabhu 1987: 71)

He also maintains that the acquisition of any element in language structure is not an instant one step procedure, for it may take several instances of intensive exposure to different samples of language. In his opinion, any attempt to develop the language system by formal means (focus on form) is rejected. Subsequently he points out that it is not the job of language teaching to discover the various aspects of the internal system, but to develop the system in the learners through exposure to communicative tasks (focus on meaning). Therefore, through exposing students to considerable number of tasks, they achieve a kind of grammatical conformity which leads them to comprehending and producing correct language forms.

3. Mechanism

Procedural Syllabus is composed of a series of problems reflected in some tasks which should be solved by the learner through using English language forms. These problems, introduced in the form of specific tasks, require students to interpret language data, for example a timetable or a set of rules, or a map with its key might be used for some particular purposes (Brumfit, 1984). As an example, students might be asked to find, name or describe specific locations on a map. Each lesson consists of two stages: a pre-task, and a task. The pre-task is

said to make known the nature of the task. In fact, it serves as a sort of introduction to the task itself since it precedes the task. Bringing relevant language into play, regulating the difficulty level of the task, and letting learners to learn from attempts made by others are some of the functions mentioned for the pre-task. The pre-task is to be attempted publicly as a teacher-guided, whole-class activity, while the task should be attempted by the learners independently. The task itself is a period of self-reliant effort by each learner to achieve a clearly perceived goal (e.g. interpreting a schedule or a map). In this regard, Prabhu says:

The two tasks are similar in that they demand similar processes of reasoning, or consist of similar sequences of questions (each sequence graded within itself), and employ either the same or similar situations, sets of facts, or texts. Each task, however, requires an independent effort of the mind, i.e. it is not possible to transfer either the outcome or the procedures of one mechanically to the other. The pattern is roughly analogous to that of a lesson in mathematics, where a problem is worked out publicly and a similar problem is then set for learners to work out on their own. ... The pre-task and task pattern divides a lesson desirably into an initial period of whole-class activity, teacher direction and oral interaction and a later period of sustained self-dependent effort by learners sustained reading, listening, and some writing. (Prabhu 1987: 55)

There is also a third stage called feedback, in which the students receive feedback on their accomplishment of the tasks. Here is an example of how these three stages are orchestrated in the class.

- 1) A short dialogue is handed to students, and two students read it out loud, each taking a part.
- 2) Pre-task: the teacher discusses twenty-four free response comprehension questions with the class, asking for answers, and using whatever language comes naturally in order to establish communication.
- 3) Task: for homework, students are asked to say whether five statements, which are given to them, are true or false with reference to the dialogue. They are asked to give reasons for their choices.
- 4) The students' true/false answers receive 'marks', so that they are provided with feedback in terms of the task.

(From Brumfit, 1984: 236)

4. Nature of the Tasks

Prabhu provides us with an abstract definition of task for the purposes of the procedural syllabus which is oriented towards cognition, reasoning, process, and teacher-regulated pedagogy:

An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a task. (Prabhu, 1987: 24)

As mentioned earlier, procedural syllabus is a task-based syllabus which stresses the importance of focus-on-meaning activities. In this sense meaning-focused activities are divided broadly into three categories, including information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap activities.

- 1) Information-gap activity “involves a transfer of given information from one person to another or from one form to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language.” Prabhu gives an example of information-gap activity in which each pair has a part of the total information and attempts to convey it verbally to the other pair. (Prabhu, 1987: 46)
- 2) Reasoning-gap activity “involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.” An example could be deciding on the best course of action for a particular purpose and within given constraints. (Prabhu, 1987: 46)
- 3) Opinion-gap activity “involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation.” Story completion and participation in the discussion of a social issue are offered as examples of opinion-gap activities. (Prabhu, 1987: 47)

Some of the tasks suggested by Prabhu (1987) are provided here.

1. Diagrams and formations

- A) Naming parts of a diagram with numbers and letters of the alphabet, as instructed.
- B) Placing numbers and letters in relation to one another, as instructed, to arrive at particular formations.
- C) Placing letters and numbers in given crossword formats.

5. Maps

- A) Finding, naming or describing specific locations on a given map.
- B) Constructing a map from given descriptions/instructions.
- C) Deciding on the best route from one place to another; giving directions.

16. Stories and Dialogues

- A) Listening to stories and completing them with appropriate solutions.
- B) Reading stories or dialogues and answering comprehension questions.
- C) Completing or continuing given dialogues as appropriate to given situations.

18. Personal details

- A) Finding items of information relevant to a particular situation in an individual's curriculum vitae.

B) Constructing a CV from personal information.

(From Prabhu, 1987: 140)

To win the approval of the teacher, to gain the admiration of one's peers, and also to obtain the intellectual pleasure of solving problems are considered immediate sources of motivation for learners. Although learners' commitment to a task is more important than their success, some measure of success is regarded essential for preserving learners' predisposition to venture, since frequent failure could contribute to a sense of frustration or negative self-image. Therefore it is important for the teacher "to regulate the challenge offered by tasks and operate generally with some notion of what represents reasonable challenge for a given class". Regarding the concept of reasonable challenge, Prabhu maintains:

Tasks in a procedural syllabus should be intellectually challenging enough to maintain students' interest, for that is what will sustain learners' efforts at task completion, focus them on meaning and, as part of that process, engage them in confronting the task's linguistic demands. (Prabhu, 1987: 56)

Hasan (2007) also in this regard states that a reasonable task is the one in which approximately half the learners in the class should be successful in carrying out half the task. Task variety is also considered important after every few lessons, since over-familiarity leads to fatigue as White (1988) puts it.

5. Group Work and Error Treatment

As mentioned earlier, in the pre-task stage students are allowed to interact in order to benefit from each other's intellectual ability in doing the tasks. In spontaneous interactions generated between students, examples of erroneous language forms are legion, due to their target language proficiency deficiency. Prabhu maintains that these grammatically incorrect language forms could contribute to the fossilization of the learners' internal system, if not controlled. Hence the CTP is concerned to eschew the influence of grammatically incorrect language forms on learners' internal systems. Accordingly, group/pair work is not favored in the Procedural syllabus in the sense that it could lead to the fossilization of the learners' internal system.

Errors are corrected in this approach by the teacher or students. However, there is no attempt on the part of teacher to provide a rule of grammar or spelling. This is what Prabhu terms incidental correction which is distinguished from systematic correction. Systematic correction "involves a larger interruption of on-going activity to focus learners' attention to an error that has taken place by providing an explanation of a set of other instances in the hope of preventing a recurrence of the error". (Prabhu, 1987: 63)

6. Evaluation of the Project

In an attempt to evaluate the Bangalore/Madras project and Procedural syllabus, Beretta, & Davies (1985) conducted an experiment to determine whether there was any demonstrable difference in terms of achievement in English between classes of children who had been taught on the CTP and their peers who had received normal instruction in the respective

schools. So three hypotheses were raised to be either confirmed or rejected by the results of the experiment:

- 1) There is a difference between the language abilities arising from form-focused teaching and those arising from meaning-focused teaching.
- 2) Acquisition of non-syllabus-based structure is best achieved without focus on form.
- 3) Structure acquired without focus on form is more readily available for deployment than structure learned with focus on form.

(From Beretta & Davies, 1985: 125)

In sum, the results of the experiment show a pattern which is compatible with the first and third hypotheses, and partially conforming to the second one. That is, language form can be learnt when the learner's attention is focused on meaning.

7. Merits

- 1) Innovation: the procedural syllabus is regarded novel in comparison to the conventional syllabuses which mainly focused on presenting lists of notions, functions, or structures.
- 2) Focus on meaning: In a procedural syllabus, students learn linguistic forms through communication. That is, no attention is paid to acquiring linguistic forms. They are to be acquired as a by-product of the process of task completion.
- 3) No pre-selection of linguistic items: Procedural syllabus is not structurally or lexically graded. Rather the contents of materials are characterized in holistic units of communication or tasks.
- 4) Naturalness: Prabhu believes that focus on form deters language learning. In his opinion, through focus on meaning, a natural process of learning occurs, giving procedural syllabus a natural sense in its approach to language learning.

8. Demerits

- 1) The prominence of reasoning: The CTP is believed to rely too much on student reasoning. Prabhu maintains that "learners need the security of working with problems in which the answers are clearly right or wrong, and he wishes to encourage guessing and trial-and-error without too much freedom to go astray, so he prefers a small range of possible answers". (Brumfit, 1984: 236)
- 2) Discouragement of group work: The CTP is also criticized for its discouragement of group work, as mentioned earlier. It is believed that learners' use of their mother tongue and spontaneous interaction, generated between members of a group will promote 'pidginization' or impoverished and inaccurate linguistic messages (Brumfit 1984) (Johnson & Johnson 1999).
- 3) No rationale for content specification: Long & Crookes (1992) criticize Procedural syllabus, as no rationale exists for the content of this syllabus, or for task selection. "It is

impossible for anyone to verify the appropriacy of particular pedagogic tasks for a given group of learners without objective evaluation criteria, one of which must surely be relevance to learner needs.” (Long & Crookes, 1992: 37)

- 4) No criteria for grading and sequencing tasks: Another fault Long & Crookes (1992) find with Procedural syllabus is that grading and sequencing tasks seem to be “arbitrary processes, left partly to judgments by the classroom teacher”. Thus no criteria are regarded for both grading the difficulty level of the tasks and their sequencing. (Long & Crookes, 1992: 37)
- 5) Lack of any structural or semantic planning: Johnson & Johnson (1999) criticize Procedural syllabus for being deficient in adequate and systematic coverage of the language. They believe that lack of any structural or semantic planning leads to a long period of incubation between learners’ first exposure and mastery.
- 6) The absence of any real life task: Procedural syllabus is also blamed for its paucity of any real life task, as it comprises a random selection of chunks of the content of other subjects.
- 7) The undefined concept of task: White (1988) criticizes Procedural syllabus for its vague definition of task. As mentioned earlier, Prabhu’s definition of task is abstract, unclear, and more oriented toward cognition and process. Greenwood (1985) also criticizes Prabhu, for some of the activities employed in his Procedural syllabus under the rubric of task, are not different from Wilkins’ functions.
- 8) The extent to which teachers actually implement and own the principles of the Procedural syllabus: Beretta (1990) questions the CTP and Procedural syllabus on three different levels of implementation: Orientation, Routine, and Renewal.

Orientation: Teachers, who were not well aware of the methodology and underlying principles of the Bangalore Project.

Routine: Teachers who were well aware of both the methodological implications of the project and how to use it.

Renewal: Teachers who had mastered the principles of the project and were ready to modify its basic assumptions.

They revealed that 47% of Bangalore/Madras Project teachers reached a routine level of implementation. Another 40% of the teachers just achieved an orientation level of implementation. And the remaining 13% could reach a renewal level of implementation.

9. Conclusion

On the whole, procedural syllabus is considered an innovative approach to syllabus design and materials development, focusing on task completion and communication with no attention paid to linguistic forms. However, the concept of task, as mentioned earlier has rather an unclear definition. Greenwood (1985) asserts, some of the tasks used in the Procedural syllabus are similar to Wilkins functions and notions. One major criticism leveled

against Procedural syllabus is the concept of incubation. As mentioned earlier, since no structural and semantic plan for the coverage of language items is devised, a long period of interval intervenes between learners' first exposure to language items and their mastery. As a result learners do not have adequate exposure to language items which prolongs the process of language learning. The solution suggested for this problem is to come up with a precise plan in which every task is investigated in terms of its linguistic load. In other words, the linguistic load of tasks, written for this syllabus should be scrutinized in order for them to expose learners adequately to language forms, so that the problem of incubation is resolved.

Group work is considered to be a major component of task-based syllabuses. But in Procedural syllabus, it is not much favored, as it is assumed to lead to pidginization and fossilization which can be hindered with resort to teacher's proficiency and expertise in error treatment.

Use of real life tasks could also promote communication. Greenwood and White assume that most of the tasks suggested in Prabhu's book are similar to Wilkins notions and functions. As an example, Greenwood (1985) states that "carrying out directions seems to be the familiar function prevalent in many a recent course book. Does this mean that task equals function? Or detecting chronological contradictions seems to bring us back to the concept of notions". (Greenwood, 1985: 269)

None the less, the CTP and Procedural syllabus are proved to be effective approaches to language teaching and materials development respectively. As Beretta & Davies concluded, "The experiment provided tentative support for the CTP claim that grammar construction can take place through a focus on meaning alone". (Beretta & Davies, 1985: 126)

Back to the title of this paper, this question might arise that "Is Procedural syllabus a follow-up to previous instances of syllabi or an alternative?" Notional-functional and Lexical syllabi could all be considered follow-ups to conventional syllabuses because of their orientation toward language teaching and learning. As mentioned above these syllabuses, after enjoying some measure of success, were criticized for replacing one list with another. In other words, the problem with these syllabuses was not their contents, rather their view of language teaching and learning (focus on form) needed to be impinged on. Instead Procedural syllabus came into being with a whole new idea that language can be learnt through focus on meaning. Specifically, learners' minds have the capacity to develop an internal system of grammar without requiring any attention to form. Put another way, linguistic forms are not to be directly processed by the mind; instead they can be acquired at a subconscious level of processing when the conscious mind is focused to perform some communicative tasks. However, it should be borne in mind that the process of internal system development takes too much time to incubate. With regard to its viewpoint toward language teaching and learning on one hand and its peculiarity in content selection on the other hand, Procedural syllabus can be considered an alternative rather than a follow-up to former syllabi.

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