JACK C. RICHARDS

# CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Curriculum Development in Language Teaching

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# Curriculum Development in Language Teaching

*Jack C. Richards*

Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization

Regional Language Centre, Singapore

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521800600

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First published in print format 2001

ISBN-13 978-0-511-50044-2 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-80060-0 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-80491-2 paperback

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# *Contents*

Series editor's preface ix
Preface xi

1 The origins of language curriculum development 1

Historical background 2
Vocabulary selection 4
Grammar selection and gradation 9
Assumptions underlying early approaches to syllabus design 15
Discussion questions and activities 16
Appendix 1 Entries from *A General Service List of English Words* 17
Appendix 2 Entries from *Cambridge English Lexicon* 18
Appendix 3 Part of an early English grammatical syllabus 20
References 22

2 From syllabus design to curriculum development 23

The quest for new methods 23
Changing needs for foreign languages in Europe 26
English for specific purposes 28
Needs analysis in ESP 32
Communicative language teaching 36
Emergence of a curriculum approach in language teaching 39
Discussion questions and activities 43
Appendix 1 Example of scientific writing 45
Appendix 2 Words found often in academic reading materials 47
References 48

3 Needs analysis 51

The purposes of needs analysis 52
What are needs? 54

The users of needs analysis 55
The target population 57
Administering the needs analysis 58
Procedures for conducting needs analysis 59
Designing the needs analysis 63
Making use of the information obtained 64
Discussion questions and activities 67
Examples of needs analyses 68
Appendix 1 Designing a questionnaire 72
Appendix 2 Needs analysis questionnaire for Cantonese learners 73
Appendix 3 Needs analysis questionnaire for non-English-background students 80
References 89

4 Situation analysis 90

Societal factors 93
Project factors 95
Institutional factors 97
Teacher factors 99
Learner factors 101
Adoption factors 103
Profiling the factors identified in the situation analysis 105
Discussion questions and activities 106
Appendix 1 Situation analysis profile 108
Appendix 2 Matrix for identifying factors in curriculum renewal process 108
References 111

5 Planning goals and learning outcomes 112

The ideology of the curriculum 113
Stating curriculum outcomes 120
Nonlanguage outcomes and process objectives 133
Discussion questions and activities 137
Appendix 1 Behavioral objectives 139
Appendix 2 Listening and conversation skills 140
Appendix 3 ESOL standards for grades 4–8 141
References 142

6 Course planning and syllabus design 145

The course rationale 145
Describing the entry and exit level 146
Choosing course content 147
Determining the scope and sequence 149
Planning the course structure 151
Preparing the scope and sequence plan 167
Discussion questions and activities 168
Appendix 1 Proficiency descriptions for the domain of speaking 170
Appendix 2 Description of performance levels; writing 174
Appendix 3 Band descriptors for oral interaction skills 176
Appendix 4 Grammar items and their sequence in a first-year English course 178
Appendix 5 Threshold level syllabus 179
Appendix 6 Skills syllabus for listening and speaking 182
Appendix 7 Designing a course from texts 185
Appendix 8 A unit from *Passages 1* 187
Appendix 9 Part of the scope and sequence chart from *New Interchange,* vol. 1 195
References 196

7 Providing for effective teaching 198

The institution 198
The teachers 209
The teaching process 214
The learning process 223
Discussion questions and activities 225
Appendix 1 Institutional mission statement 227
Appendix 2 Best practice in English language teaching 228
Appendix 3 Assessment criteria for teaching practice 231
Appendix 4 Checklist for evaluating a teacher's lesson 232
Appendix 5 Qualities and competencies of a good English teacher 236
Appendix 6 Self-evaluation of a teacher's lesson 240
Appendix 7 Student appraisal form 244
Appendix 8 Peer appraisal form 246
References 249

8 The role and design of instructional materials 251

Authentic versus created materials 252
Textbooks 254
Evaluating textbooks 256
Adapting textbooks 260
Preparing materials for a program 261
Managing a materials writing project 267
Monitoring the use of materials 270
Discussion questions and activities 271
Appendix 1 Guidelines for developing reading activities 272
Appendix 2 Checklist for evaluation and selection of course books 274
Appendix 3 Case study of materials development project 277
References 284

9 Approaches to evaluation 286

Purposes of evaluation 288
Formative evaluation 288
Illuminative evaluation 289
Summative evaluation 291
Issues in program evaluation 294
Procedures used in conducting evaluations 299
Discussion questions and activities 304
Appendix Examples of program evaluations 305
References 309

Author index 311

Subject index 314

# *Series editor's preface*

The activities of language teaching have often been viewed from a very narrow perspective. This is evident from the fascination with teaching methods that has characterized the history of language teaching until relatively recently. Methods have often been regarded as the most important factor in determining the success of a language program, and advances in language teaching have sometimes been seen as being dependent on the adoption of the latest method. A perspective often missing from the method-based view of teaching is that of how methods interact with other factors in the teaching-learning process. Who are the learners and the teachers? What expectations do they have for the program? What learning and teaching styles do they bring to the program? For what purposes is the language needed? What goals does the program have, and how are these goals expressed? In what settings will teaching take place, and what organizational structure is in place to support and maintain good teaching? What resources will be used, and what are their roles? What is the role of textbooks and other materials? What measures will be used to determine the success of the program? Choice of teaching method cannot therefore be made unless a great deal is known about the context for the language program and the interactions between the different elements involved. It is this perspective that characterizes a curriculum-based approach to language teaching.

This book presents an approach to the teaching-learning process that sees successful language as being dependent upon the activities of curriculum development, that is, the use of a variety of planning and implementation processes involved in developing or renewing a language program. These processes include determining learners' needs, analysis of the context for the program and consideration of the impact of contextual factors, the planning of learning outcomes, the organization of a course or set of teaching materials, the selection and preparation of teaching materials, provision for and maintenance of effective teaching, and evaluation of the program. These elements constitute a set of interrelated elements, and their nature and function form the focus of this book. The book seeks to survey key issues and practices within language curriculum development in order to provide the

basis for more effective planning and decision making in language program development, implementation, and review. I hope that teachers and other language teaching professionals will find that this book helps them better understand and use the skills involved in developing effective language programs.

Jack C. Richards

# *Preface*

Like many language teaching professionals, I entered the field of language teaching as a classroom teacher, anticipating that as I accumulated experience and professional knowledge, I would become a better teacher. As many others have discovered, however, I soon came to realize that being an effective teacher meant much more than becoming a more skillful and knowledgeable classroom practitioner. It meant learning how to develop and adapt materials, to plan and evaluate courses, to adapt teaching to students' needs, and to function within an institutional setting. It became clear that effective teaching was dependent on understanding the context for teaching, the needs of teachers and learners, the careful planning of courses and materials, as well as the monitoring of teaching and learning. In short, it was necessary to try to understand teaching as a part of an interrelated set of factors and processes that are often referred to as curriculum development.

This book seeks to describe and examine the processes of curriculum development in language teaching in order to acquaint language teachers and teachers-in-training with fundamental issues and practices in language curriculum development. Curriculum development is an essentially practical activity since it seeks to improve the quality of language teaching through the use of systematic planning, development, and review practices in all aspects of a language program. The book tries to provide as many examples as possible of how some of the practical problems in language program development have been addressed by practitioners in many parts of the world. At the same time, the practices employed in developing and renewing language programs themselves reflect ongoing theories and developments in language teaching pedagogy, second language acquisition theory, educational theory, and related fields; hence the book also seeks to highlight important theoretical issues that can have a significant impact on language curriculum practices.

The book is planned for use in in-service courses and workshops as well as to provide a sourcebook for teachers, program administrators, and other language teaching professionals. The book as a whole examines the key processes in curriculum development, including needs analysis, planning

goals and outcomes, course planning, teaching, materials development, and evaluation. In the earlier chapters, I have provided a historical perspective on how the field of curriculum development in language teaching has evolved, since I believe it is important for language teaching professionals to have some sense of the history of the issues that have shaped the development of language teaching. The subsequent chapters seek to survey key issues related to curriculum development issues and processes, illustrating different points of view and providing detailed practical examples by way of illustration. Discussion questions at the end of each chapter provide opportunities for further reflection and application of some of the issues discussed.

The book reflects my own 30 years of experience as a teacher, teacher educator, program director, and materials writer in many different parts of the world. Any expertise I can claim to have in curriculum development is a result of learning through the practical experience of developing curriculum and materials and directing language programs. My initial explorations in language curriculum development took me from New Zealand, where I received my initial teacher training, to Quebec, where I completed my doctoral research in syllabus design with W. F. Mackey in the 1970s. Subsequently, I have spent periods of time in universities and teacher training centers in Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Hawaii, and New Zealand, working in all aspects of language teaching from curriculum and materials development, to teaching, to program administration. I have also served as a consultant to a number of curriculum projects and institutions in different parts of the world. A recent 10-year annual consultancy with the Ministry of Education of the Sultanate of Oman also provided an invaluable opportunity to provide input to curriculum and materials development projects at a national level. At the same time, experience as a writer of commercial language teaching materials with a worldwide market has provided opportunities to work regularly with teachers and teacher trainers in more than twenty countries, an experience that has given additional perspectives on problems involved in developing and using teaching materials. In recent years I have been in the pleasant position of being able to divide my time between classroom teaching, teacher training, and writing, from the congenial environment provided by the Regional Language Center in Singapore, whose unique library resources and materials collection proved invaluable during the preparation of this book.

Earlier versions of this book have been used in postgraduate and in-service courses at the University of Arizona in the United States; the University of Auckland, New Zealand; the National Institute of Education, Singapore; the Regional Language Center, Singapore; and the SEAMEO Regional

Training Center, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions received from teachers and students at these institutions. I am also grateful for detailed comments on the manuscript from Dr. Jun Liu, University of Arizona, Dr. Ted Rodgers, University of Hawaii, Geoffrey Crewes, CEO of the Indonesian-Australian Language Foundation, Jakarta, Indonesia, and several anonymous reviewers.

Jack C. Richards

# *Credits*

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# 1 The origins of language curriculum development

The focus of this book is the processes involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating language programs. By a language program I refer to any organized course of language instruction. Second and foreign language teaching is one of the world's largest educational enterprises and millions of children and adults worldwide devote large amounts of time and effort to the task of mastering a new language. Teachers too invest a great deal of their energies into planning language courses, preparing teaching materials, and teaching their classes. What educational principles are these activities based on? What values do these principles reflect? Whose interests do they serve? And can our practices be improved through reviewing the principles we operate from and critically examining the practices that result from them? The goal of this book is to provide some of the tools for this process of review and reflection through surveying approaches to language curriculum development and examining ways of addressing the issues that arise in developing and evaluating language programs and language teaching materials. Language curriculum development deals with the following questions, which provide the framework for this book:

- What procedures can be used to determine the content of a language program?
- What are learners' needs?
- How can learners' needs be determined?
- What contextual factors need to be considered in planning a language program?
- What is the nature of aims and objectives in teaching and how can these be developed?
- What factors are involved in planning the syllabus and the units of organization in a course?
- How can good teaching be provided in a program?
- What issues are involved in selecting, adapting, and designing instructional materials?
- How can one measure the effectiveness of a language program?

Language curriculum development is an aspect of a broader field of educational activity known as curriculum development or curriculum studies. Curriculum development focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values students learn in schools, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning in schools or educational systems can be planned, measured, and evaluated. Language curriculum development refers to the field of applied linguistics that addresses these issues. It describes an interrelated set of processes that focuses on designing, revising, implementing, and evaluating language programs.

## Historical background

The history of curriculum development in language teaching starts with the notion of syllabus design. Syllabus design is one aspect of curriculum development but is not identical with it. A syllabus is a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested. Thus the syllabus for a speaking course might specify the kinds of oral skills that will be taught and practiced during the course, the functions, topics, or other aspects of conversation that will be taught, and the order in which they will appear in the course. Syllabus design is the process of developing a syllabus. Current approaches to syllabus design will be discussed in Chapter 6. Curriculum development is a more comprehensive process than syllabus design. It includes the processes that are used to determine the needs of a group of learners, to develop aims or objectives for a program to address those needs, to determine an appropriate syllabus, course structure, teaching methods, and materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language program that results from these processes. Curriculum development in language teaching as we know it today really began in the 1960s, though issues of syllabus design emerged as a major factor in language teaching much earlier. In this chapter we will look at the approaches to syllabus design that emerged in the first part of the twentieth century and that laid the foundations for more broadly based curriculum approaches that are used in language teaching today.

If we look back at the history of language teaching throughout the twentieth century, much of the impetus for changes in approaches to language teaching came about from changes in teaching methods. The method concept in teaching – the notion of a systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language and language learning – is a powerful one and the quest for better methods has been a preoccupation of many teach-

ers and applied linguists since the beginning of the twentieth century. Many methods have come and gone in the last 100 years in pursuit of the "best method," as the following chronology illustrates, with dates suggesting periods of greatest dominance:

Grammar Translation Method (1800–1900)
Direct Method (1890–1930)
Structural Method (1930–1960)
Reading Method (1920–1950)
Audiolingual Method (1950–1970)
Situational Method (1950–1970)
Communicative Approach (1970–present)

Mackey (1965, 151) commented that although there has been a preference for particular methods at different times, methods often continue in some form long after they have fallen out of favor; this observation is still true today, with grammar translation still alive and well in some parts of the world. Common to each method is the belief that the teaching practices it supports provide a more effective and theoretically sound basis for teaching than the methods that preceded it. The characteristics of many of the methods listed above have been described elsewhere and need not concern us further here (e.g., Richards and Rodgers 1986). But it is important to recognize that although methods are specifications for the processes of instruction in language teaching – that is, questions of *how* – they also make assumptions about *what* needs to be taught, that is, the content of instruction. For example, the oral-based method known as the Direct Method, which developed in opposition to the Grammar Translation Method in the late nineteenth century, prescribes not only the way a language should be taught, with an emphasis on the exclusive use of the target language, intensive question-and-answer teaching techniques, and demonstration and dramatization to communicate meanings of words; it also prescribes the vocabulary and grammar to be taught and the order in which it should be presented. The Direct Method hence assumes a particular type of syllabus. However, as new methods emerged to replace the Grammar Translation Method, the initial concern was not with syllabus questions but with approaches to teaching and methodological principles that could be used to support an oral-based target-language–driven methodology. Harold Palmer, the prominent British applied linguist who laid the foundations for the Structural Method in the 1920s, summarized the principles of language teaching methodology at that time as follows:

1. Initial preparation – orienting the students towards language learning
2. Habit-forming – establishing correct habits

3. Accuracy – avoiding inaccurate language
4. Gradation – each stage prepares the student for the next
5. Proportion – each aspect of language given emphasis
6. Concreteness – movement from the concrete to the abstract
7. Interest – arousing the student's interest at all times
8. Order of progression – hearing before speaking, and both before writing
9. Multiple line of approach – many different ways used to teach the language

(Palmer [1922] 1968, 38–39)

Once a consensus had emerged concerning the principles underlying an oral-based methodology, applied linguists then turned their attention to issues of the content and syllabus design underlying the Structural Method. Initial steps in this direction centered on approaches to determining the vocabulary and grammatical content of a language course. This led to procedures that were known as *selection* and *gradation.*

In any language program a limited amount of time is available for teaching. One of the first problems to be solved is deciding what should be selected from the total corpus of the language and incorporated in textbooks and teaching materials. This came to be known as the problem of *selection.* Mackey (1965, 161) comments: "Selection is an inherent characteristic of all methods. Since it is impossible to teach the whole of a language, all methods must in some way or other, whether intentionally or not, select the part of it they intend to teach." The field of selection in language teaching deals with the choice of appropriate units of the language for teaching purposes and with the development of techniques and procedures by which the language can be reduced to that which is most useful to the learner (Mackey 1965). All teaching, of course, demands a choice of what will be taught from the total field of the subject, and the teaching of a language at any level and under any circumstances requires the selection of certain features of the language and the intentional or unintentional exclusion of others. Two aspects of selection received primary attention in the first few decades of the twentieth century: *vocabulary selection* and *grammar selection.* Approaches to these two aspects of selection laid the foundations for syllabus design in language teaching.

## Vocabulary selection

Vocabulary is one of the most obvious components of language and one of the first things applied linguists turned their attention to. What words should

be taught in a second language? This depends on the objectives of the course and the amount of time available for teaching. Educated native speakers are thought to have a recognition vocabulary of some 17,000 words, but this is a much larger number of words than can be taught in a language course. Not all the words that native speakers know are necessarily useful for second language learners who have only a limited time available for learning. Should they set out to learn 500, 1,000, or 5,000 words? And if so, which ones? This is the issue of vocabulary selection in language teaching. Is selection something that should be left entirely to the intuitions of textbook writers and course planners or are there principles that can be used to produce a more objective and rational approach? Leaving selection issues to the intuitions of textbook writers can lead to very unreliable results. For example, Li and Richards (1995) examined five introductory textbooks used for teaching Cantonese (the language spoken in Hong Kong) in order to determine what words the textbook compilers considered essential for foreigners to learn and the extent to which textbook writers agreed on what constitutes the basic vocabulary of Cantonese as a second language. Each of the books was designed for a similar type of student and assumed no background knowledge of the language. Each set out to teach basic communicative skills, though the methodology of each book varied. It was found that the five books introduced a total of approximately 1,800 different words, although not all of these words occurred in each of the five texts. The distribution of words in the five books is as follows:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Words occurring in one of the texts | 1,141 words | = 63.4% |
| Words occurring in two of the texts | 313 words | = 17.4% |
| Words occurring in three of the texts | 155 words | = 8.6% |
| Words occurring in four of the texts | 114 words | = 6.3% |
| Words occurring in all of the texts | 77 words | = 4.3% |

(Li and Richards 1995)

From these figures it can be seen that a substantial percentage of the corpus (63.4 percent) consists of words that occurred in only one of the five texts. These words could not therefore be considered to belong to the essential vocabulary of Cantonese for second language learners and would not be worth learning. Many are probably items that are specific to the topic of a dialogue or situation that was used to practice a particular grammatical item or structure. The same could be said of words occurring in only two of the texts, which constituted a further 17.4 percent of the corpus. Only words that occurred in three or more of the texts could reasonably be described as being important vocabulary, because three or more of the textbook writers included them in their textbooks. This list contains 346 words or some 20 per-

cent of the corpus. The conclusion that can be drawn is that a student studying from any of the books in this study would spend a large amount of time trying to understand and use vocabulary that is probably of little importance. It was to avoid this kind of problem with regard to English that applied linguists in the first few decades of the twentieth century turned to the issue of vocabulary selection.

The goals of early approaches to selection are described in the foreword to West (1953):

> A language is so complex that selection from it is always one of the first and most difficult problems of anyone who wishes to teach it systematically. It has come to be more and more generally realized that random selection is a wasteful approach, and that only a complete system capable of continuous enlargement can form a satisfactory objective for the first stage in any attempt to grasp as much as possible of the entire language as may ultimately be necessary. Roughly a language system may be considered as consisting of words entering into grammatical constructions spoken with conventional stress and intonation. To find the minimum number of words that could operate together in constructions capable of entering into the greatest variety of contexts has therefore been the chief aim of those trying to simplify English for the learner. Various criteria have been employed in choosing the words, but the dominant activity throughout the period among all those concerned with systematic teaching of English has been vocabulary selection. (Jeffery, in West 1953, v)

Some of the earliest approaches to vocabulary selection involved counting large collections of texts to determine the frequency with which words occurred, since it would seem obvious that words of highest frequency should be taught first. But what kinds of material should be analyzed? Obviously, a frequency count based on children's books might identify a different set of words than an analysis of words used in *Time Magazine.* The earliest frequency counts undertaken for language teaching were based on analysis of popular reading materials and resulted in a *word frequency list.* (This was in the days before tape recorders made possible the analysis of words used in the spoken language and before computers could be used to analyze the words used in printed sources.) Word frequency research revealed some interesting facts about vocabulary usage. For example, it was discovered that a small class of words (around 3,000) accounted for up to 85 percent of the words used in everyday texts but that it would take an extra 6,000 words to increase this by 1 percent. It was also found that about half the words in a text occur only once. However, recognizing 85 percent of the words in a text is not the same as understanding 85 percent of the text. One or two words per line will still not be understood, and these are often the key words in the text since they reflect the topic of the text and the new information in it. Van

Els, Bongaerts, Extra, Van Os, and Janssen-van Dieten (1984, 206) also point out:

> Text comprehension is not just a function of the proportion of familiar words, but depends on a number of other factors as well, such as the subject matter of the text, the way in which the writer approaches the subject, and the extent to which the reader is already familiar with the subject.

Word frequencies are important in planning word lists for language teaching. But frequency is not necessarily the same thing as usefulness because the frequency of words depends on the types of language samples that are analyzed. The most frequent words occurring in samples of sports writing will not be the same as those occurring in fiction. In order to ensure that the frequency of occurrence of words in a corpus corresponds to their relative importance for language learners, the texts or language samples chosen as the basis for the corpus must be relevant to the needs of target learners and words must be frequent in a wide range of different language samples. This indicates a word's *range* or *dispersion* in a corpus. Words with the highest frequency and the widest range are considered to be the most useful ones for the purposes of language teaching. The following figures illustrate the difference between frequency and range in a 1 million-word corpus (cited in McCarthy 1990, 84–85). For every word, the first column gives the frequency of the word in the corpus, the second column describes the number of text types the word occurred in (e.g., sports writing, film reviews, newspaper editorials) out of a total of 15. The third column tells the number of individual text samples a word occurred in: the maximum number is 500 samples, each of which is 200 words long.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| sections | 49 | 8 | 36 |
| farmers | 49 | 8 | 24 |
| worship | 49 | 8 | 22 |
| earnings | 49 | 7 | 15 |
| huge | 48 | 11 | 39 |
| address | 48 | 11 | 36 |
| conscious | 47 | 14 | 34 |
| protest | 47 | 13 | 33 |
| dependent | 47 | 07 | 30 |
| comfort | 46 | 14 | 39 |
| exciting | 46 | 13 | 37 |

It was soon realized, however, that frequency and range were not sufficient as a basis for developing word lists, because words with high frequency and wide range in written texts are not necessarily the most teachable words in

an introductory language course. Words such as *book, pen, desk, dictionary,* for example, are not frequent words yet might be needed early on in a language course. Other criteria were therefore also used in determining word lists. These included:

*Teachability:* In a course taught following the Direct Method or a method such as Total Physical Response, concrete vocabulary is taught early on because it can easily be illustrated through pictures or by demonstration.

*Similarity:* Some items may be selected because they are similar to words in the native language. For example, English and French have many cognates such as *table, page,* and *nation,* and this may justify their inclusion in a word list for French-speaking learners.

*Availability:* Some words may not be frequent but are readily "available" in the sense that they come quickly to mind when certain topics are thought of. For example, *classroom* calls to mind *desk, chair, teacher,* and *pupil,* and these words might therefore be worth teaching early in a course.

*Coverage:* Words that cover or include the meaning of other words may also be useful. For example, *seat* might be taught because it includes the meanings of *stool, bench,* and *chair.*

*Defining power:* Some words could be selected because they are useful in defining other words, even though they are not among the most frequent words in the language. For example, *container* might be useful because it can help define *bucket, jar,* and *carton.*

The procedures of vocabulary selection lead to the compilation of a *basic vocabulary* (or what is now called a *lexical syllabus*), that is, a target vocabulary for a language course usually grouped or graded into levels, such as the first 500 words, the second 500 words, and so on. Word frequency research has been an active area of language research since the 1920s and continues to be so because of the ease with which word frequencies and patterns of word distribution can be identified using computers. One of the most important lexical syllabuses in language teaching was Michael West's *A General Service List of English Words* (1953), which contains a list of some 2,000 "*general service* words considered suitable as the basis for learning English as a foreign language" (vii). The list also presents information on the frequencies of different meanings of each word based on a semantic frequency count (see Appendix 1). The *General Service List* incorporated the findings of a major study on vocabulary selection by the then experts in the field: The *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection,* published in 1936 (Faucett, Palmer, West, and Thorndike 1936). One objective of this report was the simplification of teaching, as opposed to the simplification of the English language. It was based on the findings of almost all of the re-

search done up to the 1930s and also utilized the empirical studies made by some prominent applied linguists in the decade prior to its publication. The *General Service List* was for many years a standard reference in making decisions about what words to use in course books, graded readers, and other teaching materials. Hindmarsh (1980) is another important vocabulary list and contains 4,500 words grouped into 7 levels (see Appendix 2).

## Grammar selection and gradation

The need for a systematic approach to selecting grammar for teaching purposes was also a priority for applied linguists from the 1920s. The number of syntactic structures in a language is large, as is seen from the contents of any grammar book, and a number of attempts have been made to develop basic structure lists for language teaching (e.g., Fries 1952; Hornby 1954; Alexander, Allen, Close, and O'Neill 1975).

The need for grammatical selection is seen in the following examples from Wilkins (1976, 59), which are some of the structures that can be used for the speech act of "asking permission."

Can/may I use your telephone, please?
Please let me use your telephone.
Is it all right to use your telephone?
If it's all right with you, I'll use your telephone.
Am I allowed to use your telephone?
Do you mind if I use your telephone?
Do you mind me using your telephone?
Would you mind if I used your telephone?
You don't mind if I use your telephone (do you)?
I wonder if you have any objection to me using your telephone?
Would you permit me to use your telephone?
Would you be so kind as to allow me to use your telephone?
Would it be possible for me to use your telephone?
Do you think you could let me use your telephone?

How can one determine which of these structures would be useful to teach? Traditionally the grammar items included in a course were determined by the teaching method in use and there was consequently a great deal of variation in what items were taught and when.

The majority of courses started with finites of *be* and statements of identification ('This is a pen', etc.). Courses that gave prominence to reading presented the Simple Tenses (essential for narrative) early, but those that claimed to use a

'Direct-Oral Method' presented the Progressive (or Continuous) Tense first and postponed the Simple tenses. (Hornby 1959, viv)

The same is sometimes true today particularly for the less commonly taught languages. For example, in the study of the content of introductory textbooks for teaching Cantonese referred to earlier (Li and Richards 1995), the grammatical structures included in the five books were analyzed. The five books were found to introduce a total of 221 different grammatical items, though they varied greatly in the number of grammatical items introduced, which no doubt influences learners' perceptions of the ease or difficulty of each book. The number of different grammatical items in each book is as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Textbook A | 100 |
| Textbook B | 148 |
| Textbook C | 74 |
| Textbook D | 91 |
| Textbook E | 84 |

However, not all of the same grammatical items occurred in each of the five texts. The distribution of grammatical items was as follows:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Total grammatical items in the five texts | | 221 |
| Items occurring in one of the texts | = 92 | 41.6% |
| Items occurring in two of the texts | = 54 | 24.4% |
| Items occurring in three of the texts | = 36 | 16.3% |
| Items occurring in four of the texts | = 17 | 7.7% |
| Items occurring in five of the texts | = 22 | 10% |

(Li and Richards 1995)

As was found with vocabulary distribution in the five course books, a substantial portion of the grammatical items occurred in only one of the texts (41.6 percent) suggesting that the authors of the texts have very different intuitions about which grammatical items learners of Cantonese need to know.

In regard to the teaching of English, from the 1930s applied linguists began applying principles of selection to the design of grammatical syllabuses. But in the case of grammar, selection is closely linked to the issue of *gradation.* Gradation is concerned with the grouping and sequencing of teaching items in a syllabus. A grammatical syllabus specifies both the set of grammatical structures to be taught and the order in which they should be taught. Palmer, a pioneer in work on vocabulary and grammar selection, explains the principle of gradation in this way ([1922], 1968, 68):

> The grammatical material must be graded. Certain moods and tenses are more useful than others; let us therefore concentrate on the useful ones first. In a language possessing a number of cases, we will not learn off the whole set of prepositions, their uses and requirements, but we will select them in accordance with their degree of importance. As for lists of rules and exceptions, if we learn them at all we will learn them in strict order of necessity. In most languages we shall probably find certain fundamental laws of grammar and syntax upon which the whole structure of the language depends; if our course is to comprise the conscious study of the mechanism of a given language, then, in accordance with the principle of gradation, let us first learn these essentials and leave the details to a later stage.

But whereas those working on vocabulary selection arrived at their word lists through empirical means starting with word frequency lists, grammatical syllabuses have generally been developed from different principles based not on the frequency of occurrence of grammatical items in texts but on intuitive criteria of simplicity and learnability. The goal has been to develop a list of structures, graded into a logical progression, which would provide an accessible and gradual introduction to the grammar of English. The approach used has been analytic. The following principles have been used or suggested as a basis for developing grammatical syllabuses.

*Simplicity and centrality:* This recommends choosing structures that are simple and more central to the basic structure of the language than those that are complex and peripheral. By these criteria the following would occur in an introductory-level English course:

*The train arrived.* (Subject Verb)
*She is a journalist.* (Subject Verb Complement)
*The children are in the bedroom.* (Subject Verb Adverb)
*We ate the fruit.* (Subject Verb Object)
*I put the book in the bag.* (Subject Verb Object Adverb)

The following would be excluded by the same criteria:

*Having neither money nor time, we decided buying a ticket to the opera was out of the question.*
*For her to speak to us like that was something we had never anticipated.*

*Frequency:* Frequency of occurrence has also been proposed in developing grammatical syllabuses, but relatively little progress was made in this area for some time because of the difficulty of deciding on appropriate grammatical units to count and the difficulty of coding grammatical structures for analysis. It is only recently that computer corpuses have enabled the dis-

tribution of structures in real language to be examined. Not surprisingly, there are often significant differences between the lists of grammatical structures developed intuitively by applied linguists and the information revealed in analyses of corpuses of real language. McCarthy and Carter (1995), for example, report on data taken from a corpus of conversational language and identify a number of features of spoken grammar, not typically included in standard teaching syllabuses: For example:

*Subject and verb ellipsis,* such as "Don't know" instead of "I don't know."
*Topic highlighting,* such as "That house on the corner, is that where you live?"
*Tails,* such as the following phrases at the end of sentences: "you know," "don't they?"
*Reporting verbs,* such as "I was saying," "They were telling me."

*Learnability:* It has sometimes been argued that grammatical syllabuses should take into account the order in which grammatical items are acquired in second language learning. For example, Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) proposed the following order of development of grammatical items, based on data elicited during interviews with second language learners at different proficiency levels:

1. nouns
2. verbs
3. adjectives
4. verb *be*
5. possessive pronouns
6. personal pronouns
7. adverbs of time
8. requests
9. simple present
10. futures
11. *wh*-questions
12. present continuous
13. directions
14. possessive adjectives
15. comparatives
16. offers
17. simple future
18. simple past
19. infinitives/gerunds
20. first conditional

Although the validity of this acquisition sequence has been questioned (e.g., Nunan 1992, 138), the idea that grammatical structures are acquired in a natural order and that this order should inform teaching has been proposed by a number of applied linguists (e.g., Pienemann 1989). However little reliable information on acquisition sequences has been produced that could be of practical benefit in planning a grammar syllabus.

In addition to decisions about which grammatical items to include in a syllabus, the sequencing or gradation of grammatical items has to be determined. The need to sequence course content in a systematic way is by no

means a recent concern. The seventeenth-century scholar Comenius (summarized by Mackey 1965, 205) argued:

> The beginning should be slow and accurate, rightly understood and immediately tested. Unless the first layer is firm, nothing should be built on it; for the whole structure will be developed from the foundations. All parts should be bound together so that one flows out of the other, and later units include earlier ones. Whatever precedes forms a step to what follows and the last step should be traceable to the first by a clear chain of connection.

The following approaches to gradation are possible:

*Linguistic distance:* Lado (1957) proposed that structures that are similar to those in the native language should be taught first. "Those elements that are similar to [the learner's] native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult" (Lado 1957, 2). This assumption underlay the approach to language comparison known as *contrastive analysis.*

*Intrinsic difficulty:* This principle argues that simple structures should be taught before complex ones and is the commonest criterion used to justify the sequence of grammatical items in a syllabus.

*Communicative need:* Some structures will be needed early on and cannot be postponed, despite their difficulty, such as the simple past in English, since it is difficult to avoid making reference to past events for very long in a course.

*Frequency:* The frequency of occurrence of structures and grammatical items in the target language may also affect the order in which they appear in a syllabus, although as we noted, little information of this sort is available to syllabus planners. Frequency may also compete with other criteria. The present continuous is not one of the most frequent verb forms in English, yet it is often introduced early in a language course because it is relatively easy to demonstrate and practice in a classroom context.

In addition to these factors, in designing a course one is also faced with a choice between two approaches to the sequencing of items in the course, namely, a *linear* or a *cyclical* or *spiral* gradation. With a linear gradation, the items are introduced one at a time and practiced intensively before the next items appears. With a cyclical gradation, items are reintroduced throughout the course.

> In a course in which the material is ordered cyclically the individual items are not presented and discussed exhaustively, as in strictly linear gradation, but only essential aspects of the item in question are presented initially. These items then keep recurring in the course, and every time new aspects will be introduced which

will be related to and integrated with what has already been learned. (Van Els et al. 1984, 228)

Although few would doubt the advantages of cyclical over linear gradation, in practice such recycling is usually left to the teacher because cyclical gradation would often result in textbooks that were excessively long.

In the 1940s, beginners' courses in English began to appear in which principles of vocabulary and grammatical control were evident and in which grammatical structures were organized into graded sequences. The methods in use at the time placed a major emphasis on the learning of "structures." The U.S. linguist Fries outlined the major structures he thought foreign students needed to learn in his books *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1946) and *The Structure of English* (1952) and these formed the grammar component for courses and materials developed at the influential English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. The Michigan materials with their focus on the core grammatical structures of English soon came to influence all materials developed in the United States for teaching ESL students and became the dominant methodology in the United States for more than 20 years (Darian 1972). In Britain Hornby built on the prewar efforts of Palmer on the grading of sentence patterns and developed a comprehensive grammatical syllabus (together with a structural approach to teaching English) in his books *Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (1954) and *The Teaching of Structural Words and Sentence Patterns* (1959). These set out the basic grammatical structures needed in English-language syllabuses and courses at different levels. The resulting pedagogical grammar of English (or variations on it) formed the basis for the grammatical syllabus of most teaching materials produced at that time (see Appendix 3). Since then other language teaching specialists have refined and further developed grammatical syllabus specifications as a basis for course design and materials development (e.g., Alexander et al. 1975).

Although both lexical and grammatical syllabuses have provided important guidelines for the development of language teaching textbooks and materials since the first such syllabuses appeared in the 1920s, it is grammar syllabuses that have been regarded as the core of a language course or program. Wilkins notes (1976, 7):

> The use of a grammatical syllabus can be regarded as the conventional approach to language teaching since the majority of syllabuses and published courses have as their core an ordered list of grammatical structures. The vocabulary content is secondary in importance and certainly rarely provides the basic structure of a course. The view is widely held that until the major part of the grammatical system has been learned, the vocabulary load should be held down to what is

pedagogically necessary and to what is desirable for the sake of ensuring adequate variety in the content of learning.

## Assumptions underlying early approaches to syllabus design

We can now examine the assumptions behind the approaches to syllabus design that emerged in the first part of the twentieth century and in the process reveal the limitations that subsequent directions in syllabus design sought to address.

### *The basic units of language are vocabulary and grammar*

Those working in the traditions discussed in this chapter approached the teaching of English largely through its vocabulary and grammar. Although the role of speaking and pronunciation were not ignored during the actual teaching of the language, the priority in planning was vocabulary and grammar and these were seen as the main building blocks of language development. Once some system and order could be introduced into these areas through careful syllabus planning and specification it was believed that language teaching could be put on a more rational and sound basis.

### *Learners everywhere have the same needs*

The focus in language teaching was on "general" English, hence the title of West's word list. It was believed that the core vocabulary of the *General Service List* together with a grammatical syllabus of the type Hornby elaborated would serve as the basis for almost all language courses.

### *Learners' needs are identified exclusively in terms of language needs*

No matter who the learners are or the circumstances of their learning, it is assumed that mastery of English will solve their problems. The goal of English teaching is to teach them English – not to teach them how to solve their problems through English.

### *The process of learning a language is largely determined by the textbook*

The primary input learners received to the language learning process was the textbook, hence the importance of the principles of selection and gra-

dation as ways of controlling the content of the textbook and facilitating language learning.

### *The context of teaching is English as a foreign language*

Most of the early work by Palmer, West, and Hornby on the development of lexical and grammatical syllabuses was done in contexts where English was a foreign language, that is, where students studied English as a formal subject in school but had no immediate need for it outside of the classroom. The classroom and the textbook provided the primary input to the language learning process, hence the goal of syllabus developers was to simplify and rationalize this input as far as possible through the processes of selection and gradation.

Changes in the status of English around the world and in the purposes for which English was studied from the 1940s on led to the next phase in the development of language curriculum development. These changes and the approaches to language curriculum development that resulted from them are the focus of Chapter 2.

## Discussion questions and activities

1. This book is about planning and implementing language courses and materials. What are three aspects of these processes that are of greatest interest to you? List these in the form of questions and compare with others.
2. What is the difference between syllabus design and curriculum development?
3. How are syllabuses developed in language programs you are familiar with?
4. What are the characteristics of a language teaching method? In what ways do methods raise issues related to curriculum development?
5. How relevant are the issues of selection and gradation to language teaching today? What factors influence current views of selection and gradation?
6. Examine a low-level language teaching text. What factors influence the selection and gradation of grammatical items in the text?
7. Are the concepts of selection and gradation compatible with the use of authentic texts or sources in language teaching?
8. How useful are word lists such as those illustrated in Appendixes 1 and 2 today?

## Appendix 1 Entries from *A General Service List of English Words*

The list (from West 1953) identifies a core 2,000-word vocabulary and also the frequency of different meanings of each word.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| FLOWER | 605e | | | |
| flower, n. | | (1a) | *(part of a plant)* | |
| | | | Pick flowers | |
| | | (1b) | *(a flowering plant)* | |
| | | | Flowers and vegetables | 86% |
| | | *Phrase:* | | |
| | | | In flower *(= in bloom)* | 1% |
| | | (2) | *(figurative)* | |
| | | | The flower of *(= best specimens)* | 4% |
| | | | In the flower of his youth *(= best part)* | 1% |
| flower-/ | | | Flower-garden, *etc.* | 0.7% |
| flower, v. | | | The roses are flowering | 4% |
| FLY | 805e | | | |
| fly, v. | | (1) | *(travel through the air)* | |
| | | | Birds fly; aeroplanes fly | |
| | | | Fly an aeroplane, a kite | 39% |
| | | *Special use:* | | |
| | | | Fly a flag | 3.5% |
| | | (2) | *(go quickly)* | |
| | | | Time flies | |
| | | | He flew to the rescue | 14% |
| | | (3) | *(Phrases implying sudden rapid motion)* | 14% |
| | | | Fly to arms; fly at; fly in the face of | 4.8% |
| | | | Fly into a rage; [fly out at] | 1.3% |
| | | | Sent it flying; the door flew open | 1.6% |
| flying, adj. | | | Flying-boat, -fish, -jump; flying column | 14% |
| | | [= *flee,* 6.3%. *The word* Flee, fled, 202e *is not included in the Report, but* fled *is rather necessary for narrative*] | | |
| fly, n. | | | *(flying insect, especially housefly)* | 11% |
| FOLD | 196e | | | |
| fold, v. | | | Fold a piece of paper | |
| | | | Fold up one's clothes | |
| | | | Fold it up in paper | |
| | | | Fold one's arms | 43% |

## Appendix 2 Entries from *Cambridge English Lexicon*

A 4,500-word vocabulary list grouped into 7 levels (Hindmarsh 1980).

B

1 baby
  1 *n.* a young child
  6 *n.* youngest: *which of you is the baby?*
  7 *adj.* not fully developed: *baby marrows*
4 baby-sitter *n.*
1 back
  1 *adv.* towards the rear: *head winds drove them back*
  1 *n.* part of the body or of an object, opposite of front: *the back of his head*
  2 *adv.* to a former state: *back to life*
  2 *adv.* in return: *to have the money back*
  3 *adv.* of time: *back in the Middle Ages*
  4 *adv.* in retaliation: *answer back; hit back*
  4 *v.* reverse: *he backed the car away*
  6 *v.* gamble on: *back a cause*
5 back out of *v.* withdraw
5 back up *v.* support
5 backbone
  5 *n.* spine
  7 *n.* main strength: *backbone of the crew*
4 background
  4 *n.* part of a view
  7 *n.* setting: *the background to the report*
5 backwards
  5 *adv.* away from front: *go backwards*
  5 *adv.* reverse order: *say the letters backwards*
5 backyard *n.*
1 bad
  1 *adj.* useless: *a bad worker*
  1 *adj.* unpleasant, incorrect: *bad manners*
  1 *adj.* immoral: *a bad man, bad behaviour*
  2 *adj.* painful: *I've got a bad head*
  4 *adj.* rotten: *go bad*
1 badly
  1 *adv.* roughly, untidily: *badly made*
  2 *adv.* much: *badly in need of repair*
  5 *adv.* very much: *she wants it badly*
  6 *adv.* poor: badly off
5 badge *n.* sign of occupation, office, membership
1 bag
  1 *n.* container for carrying solid things
  7 *n.* lots of: *bags of money*
  7 *v.* get by hunting: *bag some duck*
3 baggage *n.* luggage
2 bake
  2 *v.* cook
  3 *v.* harden: *these pots were baked in our kiln*
  7 *v.* warm one's body: *baking in the sun at the resort*
2 baker *n.*
3 balance
  3 *v.* cause to be steady: *balance a ruler on one finger*
  5 *n.* instrument for weighing
  6 *v.* equate: *balance the accounts*
  6 *n.* state of equilibrium: *balance of power*
  7 *n.* outstanding amount: *hand in the balance*