Designing a Scenario-Based Syllabus for Young Learners

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Abstract

As we tentatively proceed into this brave new teaching world of the 21st century, much debate is centering on the effective teaching of English to young learners. Key to this discussion has been the role of the young learner syllabus. While this article makes reference to the teaching of English to young learners in an ESL context based on documentation developed within the European Union, the issues raised are by no means particularly specific to this region nor merely to the teaching of the English language. On the contrary, this article aims to show how to use the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (the CEFRL) to effectively design a scenario-based syllabus and complementary materials suitable for young learners, regardless of location. The need for appropriate target setting is stressed, and the case is put forward for a scenario-based syllabus. The underlying rationale is that a second language syllabus must reflect the world of the young learner and facilitate the acquisition of language in the classroom.

Introduction

While we may recognise that every young learner has particular English language needs, priorities, and motivations, it is now generally agreed - although, as Cameron (2003) notes, there are pitfalls to jumping head first into this - that an early start to second language learning may be both advantageous and beneficial. Phillips (1993: 5) exemplifies this notion, suggesting that young learners are able to interact with language based on what it does for them and what they can do with it, rather than viewing its acquisition as some kind of intellectual challenge. The question is, therefore, how we may best go about enabling acquisition to occur in the second language classroom and to provide the necessary conditions for its growth and development on a curriculum-wide basis.

A foremost consideration is that of the syllabus (Scott (2009), North et al (2011), Haslam et al (2008), and Crosse (2007)). Any syllabus must aim to be much more than a mere inventory of teaching items; it has to also serve to define the approach to both teaching and learning. All syllabi have a duty to take into account contextual variables and constraints, while also paying respect to the principles of second language learning. With this notion in mind, this article puts forward the case for a scenario-based approach to the design of English language programs for young learners.

Objectives and content in syllabus design

Although phenomena such as the CEFRL have brought about a degree of pan-national standardization previously unknown, second language syllabus design still remains a largely imprecise discipline. Language syllabi are, or at least should be, composed with consideration given to the specifics of a particular context. Even when this occurs, it remains hard to define linguistic outcomes precisely for learners of different age groups, different socio-linguistic settings, and with diverse curricular experiences. Nevertheless, a syllabus designer needs some set of overall goals from which explicit outcomes or objectives can be targeted. For instance, the goals of an English language syllabus for young learners might be the following: to uncover discrete language items such as grammatical structures and lexical items within the context of appropriate scenarios which may be discussed, read about, and even written about; to enable learners to communicate effectively in English, so that they can talk about personal experiences (and to meet the requirements of the school curriculum); to make possible the acquisition of fluency and accuracy as a consequence of active participation in a variety of suitable tasks; and to encourage an enthusiasm for reading among learners and to develop emergent reading skills.

If, as Long & Crookes (1992:27) propose, the function of a syllabus is to produce appropriate units of work for a specific group of learners, we can see that any syllabus designed to implement these aims would contain a number of easily recognizable characteristics. Firstly, communicative activities such as games, role-plays, information gap exercises, and a variety other interactive tasks may be prevalent in such a syllabus. Secondly, we might expect to observe themed units of work, resultant from the syllabus. These themes – or scenarios - supply the scaffolding around which language is allowed to

develop. Finally, we may find communicative tasks supported by 'enabling' tasks. The basis of such activities is that learners acquire the language as a consequence of the actions they are engaged in.

The goal should always be to provide the necessary conditions and motivating experiences for the target language to be acquired by the learners themselves, rather than to teach them the new language. The needs and experiences of the young learner are fundamental.

If we are to approach this task from a perspective that is communicatively driven, an effective syllabus for young learners of English must be one which enables them to acquire the target language within the constraints that result from the confines of the traditional language classroom. The predicament teachers and learners are faced with in structural, in skills-based, and in other similarly itemized syllabi is that they are all too frequently unnecessarily over-prescriptive. Such syllabi are developed around the simplistic notion that there is a fundamental, linear relationship between what we teach and what is learned. Nunan (1994) discredited this theory, indicating that the act of learning is in fact a mutual construct: it is a collaborative occurrence involving both teachers and learners. He further noted that disparities may exist between the schema of teachers and learners within three particular domains: a) the language content domain, b) the experiential domain, and c) the learning process domain. Meddings and Thornbury (2009) reaffirm this notion, stating that language learning is an emergent, jointly-constructed and socially-constituted process, motivated both by communal and communicative imperatives.

The language content domain

Within the field of English language teaching it has become popular for course books to implement the multi-strand approach to course design. Language content has been listed under clearly defined headings such as 'language input' (where we might find reference to grammar structures and lexis) and 'skills development' (here the skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking are included). This categorization all too frequently leads to a series of lessons where the main teaching focus is grammar, or listening comprehension, or writing skills, etc. The result of this is that the course book, to all intent and purpose, becomes the 'one size fits all' syllabus and teachers merely follow the sequence of teaching items laid out for them. The notion that learners are somehow able to re-unite these discrete items once they are inside their heads does not seem to become reality, however.

Learners will benefit from a rough, broad-ranging, scenario-based input, rather than input that is finely-tuned and specific. Because the language needs to be presented in a way that makes sense to the learners, scenarios are relevant vehicles of input through which language can be contextualized. However, in addition to the language input being comprehensible to the young learner, it must also remain in the memory. Scenarios may provide just such a natural context for the integration of language input and skills development.

The experiential domain

Language teaching should always relate to the learner's experiences of the world. In order to teach the young learner, it is seen as necessary to find again and dwell in the world of the young. Young learners feel at home in a world of make-believe and fantasy, were monsters, speaking animals and aliens can exist. In the world of the young learner the concepts of linguistic terms such as tenses, nouns and adjectives hold little meaning, nor are there schematic frameworks called 'grammar', 'lexis', 'phonology', or 'discourse'. Consequently, any syllabus should be experientially appropriate to such learners. Contents may include; topics of interest to children; various kinds of stories; games and fun activities; 'doing' and 'making' activities; songs and rhymes; pair work and group work tasks; materials from the Internet; examples from children's literature; and any activity that facilitates language acquisition in the classroom. A place remains for games and (meaningful) drills, as long as these serve as 'language experiences' which act as a catalyst for authentic communication.

The learning process domain

One of the most noticeable characteristics of itemized syllabi is that the focus is almost uniformly placed on the product rather than on the learning process itself. This aspect of such syllabi ignores the fact that linguistic expression is a cognitive that requires active processing on the part of the learner. In contrast, scenario-based syllabi act as a 'process', requiring learners to notice features of the input and process them in various ways so as to translate 'language input' into 'language intake'. A learner's emerging 'inter-language' is often defined as their 'built-in syllabus.' The main objection to skills-based, structural, and other 'itemized' syllabi is that they are unnatural and that they intervene this process. Genuineness in second language learning demands a commitment to acquisition-based activities in an acquisition-rich environment, as well as the espousal of a minimal teaching strategy.

It is still not possible to accurately define what these optimal conditions might entail, but research suggests the following factors all play an important role; comprehensible input; a stress-free environment; the right to be silent; copious interaction; and some focus on form. Larsen-Freeman (1997: 151) reiterates, indicating that language learning is a complex, non-linear and rather chaotic process. Learning linguistic items is not a linear process inasmuch as learners do not master one particular item or structure and then move on to another. Indeed, the learning curve for any given item is not linear either.

The role of the CEFRL in implementing a young learner syllabus

Although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (the CEFRL) is a guideline that was originally developed to describe the achievements of adult learners of foreign languages across Europe, it is increasingly being used in other countries and in more specific contexts. Indeed, the six reference levels are becoming widely accepted as the standard for grading an individual's language proficiency.

A Basic Speaker
 A1: Breakthrough or beginner
 A2: Waystage or elementary

B Independent Speaker
 B1: Threshold or intermediate
 B2: Vantage or upper intermediate

C Proficient Speaker
 C1: Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced
 C2: Mastery or proficiency

An initial concern regarding the CEFRL was that it was somewhat difficult to interpret in terms of syllabus design and that the framework itself would replace contextually developed syllabi and exist as a 'one size fits all' quick fix. Proof that this has not happened, and furthermore that the framework can be adapted to develop young learner syllabi, is evident in a number of case studies. For instance, Little & Lazenby Simpson (in Morrow, 2004: 91-94) used the CEFRL in their efforts to integrate newcomer pupils into the Irish primary education system to great effect. The framework enabled them to clearly define the stages of ESL development in migrant learners and make use of the can-do statements to define communicative proficiency. While a degree of adaptation of the CEFRL descriptors was necessary within their specific context, this was eminently possible. Manasseh (in Morrow, 2004: 109-111) reiterates that the CEFRL allows for a practicable young learner syllabus to be developed around the adaptation of its descriptors, in this case for a syllabus at the British Council in Milan.

An acknowledgment of the aforementioned difficulty in translating the descriptors of the CEFRL into context specific syllabi has been made by the European Association of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS), in conjunction with the British Council. In their document 'Core Inventory for General English' they suggest the adoption a scenario-based syllabus which incorporates those aspects of the CEFRL which are relevant to the particular context (North et al, 2011). It is this notion of a scenario-based syllabus which will now be explored in greater detail.

The case for basing a syllabus around scenarios

Hudelson (1991: 2–5) explains the four basic principles of learning and language learning that are integral to a scenario-based approach:

Learning through doing

Young learners are at the 'concrete operations' stage of their cognitive development (Ginsburg & Opper, 1979: 152). Therefore, they learn most effectively when engaged in hands-on, tactile experiences. Consequently, in language classes these learners, '*need to be active rather than passive; they need to be engaged in activities of which language is a*

part; they need to be working on meaningful tasks and use language to accomplish those tasks' (Hudelson, 1991: 2).

Learning from one another

Within group contexts, certain members are likely to have more knowledge in a certain area than others. Those with less knowledge may learn from those with more, so young learners benefit from interacting with and learning from one another. In terms of interaction, teachers play a key role: they must also interact so as to challenge them to go beyond their current level of expression. Ellis (1997: 48) refers to this type of contextual support as 'scaffolding'.

Learning through discovery

Language acquisition is a process of discovery in which the learners need to discover how the language works: '*In terms of the classroom context, an implication is that learners need opportunities to use and to experiment with the new language*' (Hudelson, 1991: 4). Within such a context the learners should feel that making errors is part of a process that enables them to re-structure their developing language system.

Learning through social interaction

For acquisition to occur there must be a certain degree of social interaction. Meaning is a joint construct that unfolds as learners work together and exchange communication. In other words, they have to talk to one another in order to negotiate meaning.

North et al (2011: 13) acknowledge that scenarios are not a new concept in applied linguistics, although they note that there are three key aspects that such scenario-based descriptors have always shared and which need to be considered when developing such syllabi:

- A scenario is basically a mental framework for how the particular thing in question is "done" in the relevant target language. Language users and language learners have scripts and schemata for scenarios they are already familiar with from their daily lives.

- There is a strong connection to real world language use, rather than the focus being on exercises and / or pedagogic tasks. A scenario should provide a meaningful context for simulated but realistic language use by the learner. In a real-world derived scenario, simulations replace mere role-plays as we move from fictional personalities in artificial situations to real people acting as themselves in real contexts.

- A scenario indicates a holistic setting that provides the impetus for the integration of different aspects of competence in real language use. Effectively conceived scenarios create an appropriate background framework that supports learning and

teaching, where the main consideration is that of the authenticity of situations, tasks, activities, texts and language data.

When compared to the format of the familiar linear, itemized variety, the design of a scenario-based syllabus is not particularly complex. A theme is selected as the focal point for a unit of work which may extend over a given period of time, such as one or two weeks. It is the scenario itself that is the driving force of the new language items, which might be grammatical structures, language functions, or even vocabulary. Furthermore, it is the scenario that advocates appropriate listening and speaking tasks, interactive activities, reading texts and a variety of writing tasks. The aim is not to merely give learners a broad range of knowledge on a specific theme, but rather to use the scenario as a kind of instructional scaffolding that enables learners to explore certain aspects of a particular topic and the language associated with it themselves.

The quantity and range of activities contained within any given scenario may depend on various contextual constraints such as time, resources, class size and proficiency level. North et al (2011: 28-29) offer example scenarios covering a broad range of teaching contexts. For the purpose of this article, their suggestion for A2 level has been adapted to show how it may work in a young learner setting.

Scenario: out together A 2

CONTEXT	TASKS	ACTIVITIES	TEXTS
Place: school People: friends or classmates	- Planning an outing in a small group - Finding information on where to go/what's on - Presenting the plan - Reaching consensus on the final plan	- Reading for orientation - Spoken interaction: informal discussion with friends - Spoken production: sustained monologue	- Informational printed material (brochures, leaflets, etc.) - Calendars, programmes and descriptions (on websites) - Informal discussion

LEVEL	A2
Can-dos (taken from the CEFRL)	- Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters to do with work and free time. - Can identify specific information in simpler written material he / she encounters such as letters, brochures and short newspaper articles describing events / advertisements, prospectuses, menus, reference lists and timetables. - Can ask and answer questions and exchange ideas and information on familiar topics in predictable everyday situations. - Can discuss everyday practical issues in a simple way: what to do, where to go and make arrangements to meet. - Can make and respond to suggestions. - Can agree and disagree with others.
CRITERIA (taken from the CEFRL)	
FLUENCY	- Can make himself / herself understood in short contributions, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.
RANGE	- Can communicate what he/she wants to say in a simple and direct exchange of limited information on familiar and routine matters. - Can use basic sentence patterns and communicate with memorized phrases, groups of a few words. - Has sufficient vocabulary to conduct everyday discussion involving familiar situations and topics.
ACCURACY	- It is usually clear what he / she is trying to say.
COHERENCE	- Can link groups of words with simple connectors like "and, "but" and "because".
INTERACTION	- Can use simple techniques to start, maintain, or end a short turn in conversation.

COMPETENCIES		
STRATEGIC	- Skim to identify relevant texts, sections within texts. - Scan for specific services / information (e.g. times, prices, schedules). - Ask for clarification about key words or phrases not understood using stock phrases. - Use an inadequate word from repertoire and use gesture to clarify.	
PRAGMATIC	Functional	- Describing places - Describing activities - Describing past experiences - Making suggestions - Agreeing and disagreeing
	Discourse	- Managing interaction - Simple connectors "and" "but" and "because"
LINGUISTIC	Grammatical	- Present simple - Prepositional phrases (time, place and movement) - Prepositions of time (at/on/in) - Questions - Zero and 1st conditionals - Could (possibility) - Modals: should - Past simple
	Lexical	- Things in the town - Travel and services vocabulary

The amount of time the unit of work on 'Out Together' may take will depend on the amount of time given to learning English. The flexibility of the scenario-based syllabus means that each lesson may exist within its own right, containing flexible stages, while the language focus can be easily integrated into the various activities undertaken.

From scenario to classroom task

Naturally, a scenario such as the one presented here is not of much use on its own. What makes it an effective tool is what the teacher does with it. While the scenario provides the stimulation for a variety of tasks for learners to engage in, it does not fully define what happens in class. In the scenario context, a 'task' is a structured activity involving learners in some form of real interaction, which, depending on the teacher, may or may not be supported with pre-selected language items. Where young learners are concerned, two types of task appear to be particularly relevant.

Communication tasks

In such tasks the objective is fluency through interaction. Estaire & Zanon (1994: 13) suggest that a communication task can be defined as a piece of classroom work which

involves the learner in: the comprehension of the second language (spoken or written); the production of the second language (spoken or written); and oral interaction in the second language. Learners' concentration is predominantly focused on meaning rather than form. This bears some resemblance to the kinds of activities that learners undertake in everyday life and may involve all four skills.

Enabling tasks

The objective of such tasks is accuracy through focus on form. Enabling tasks are language-oriented activities which aim to present students with the requisite linguistic tools to fulfill a communication task. These can be in the form of any number of activities that aim to focus on language analysis, language awareness, and even language practice. Although Willis (1996) contends that enabling tasks should come at the end, they may, especially when we consider the needs of young learners, come before or after the communication task.

A prerequisite of an adult scenario-based syllabus is that learners already have at least a minimal working knowledge of the language they are learning. Without a practical level of second language proficiency, they could not do information-gap tasks or solve problems. However, the young learners we are considering in this article do not normally have such prior knowledge. Consequently, at the youngest age levels there needs to be some introductory groundwork on building up an inventory of enabling language. Such action will serve to facilitate genuine interaction at the later stages. This brings us to the issue of task based learning and its similarities with the scenario format. A lot of young learners will not be ready to thrive, in a communicative sense, until they are in their teenage years. Nevertheless, the task based format of scenarios is suitable for young learners because it is completely normal for someone to learn something by doing rather than, for example, by memorizing sentence patterns.

In this context, a great deal depends on the willingness and ability of the learners. If they already have some knowledge of English, they may be able to participate in structured communicative tasks. However, if they do not, a certain amount of time will have to be spent on building a linguistic base from which they can operate. This in itself is not as daunting as it might sound. Cross (2007), for instance, suggests that, '*practical activities… work well with all children who need support to improve their confidence and language skills.*'

Full integration

One of the foremost difficulties in constructing a young learner syllabus is integrating both language input and skills development. In the context of communicative language teaching, integration is paramount: There no longer remains any real justification for an itemized syllabus built around the teaching of discrete points of grammar external to the learner. Bearing in mind Krashen's assertion that children only acquire language when they receive comprehensible input, the provision of such input is vital in the case of

young learners (Krashen, 1981). The example presented in this article illustrates how grammar and vocabulary might be linked to the topic 'Out Together.'

Conclusion

The case for developing a scenario-based syllabus for young learners is centered on the notion that children learn best 'by doing' in a non-stressful, accommodating learning environment. If topics are connected to tasks, what we are presented with an extremely effective system for planning and implementing English language instruction at the young learner level. The commonly encountered linear, itemized syllabi appear to be somewhat incompatible with the notion of communicative language instruction. The continued adoption of such syllabi brings about a tedious approach to teaching methodology and the resultant boredom and frustration among young learners.

A scenario-based approach, however, is founded on the straightforward notion that the learner is the one who does the learning and the teacher's role is merely to facilitate this learning process. Nevertheless, learning requires some formal system of structure. Scenarios provide an adequately structured framework for getting young learners actively involved in the learning of a second language. A scenario-based syllabus may offer motivating units of work for young learners while also removing many of the barriers to flourishing second language learning.

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