

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?

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2 Chapter 1

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-

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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

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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

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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-

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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

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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

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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-

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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

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'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):