

TIED TO THE TOPIC: INTEGRATING GRAMMAR AND SKILLS IN KBSM

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ABSTRACT

For many English teachers, the role of the topic in the KBSM syllabus is problematic. While the syllabus and textbooks are organised around topics of themes, the examination focuses on language skills and grammatical ability. Thus there is a perceived conflict between the official syllabus, the textbook syllabus and the examination syllabus, leaving teachers in a dilemma over what to teach. As a result, some may teach about the topic, rather than through the topic.

This paper will examine the role of the topic in an integrated approach, and the way this is handled in the KBSM syllabus, textbooks and examinations. It will attempt to establish some principles that can be used in designing classroom tasks which integrate topic with language skills and grammar.

1 The New Curriculum

In 1979 the Cabinet Report on Education recommended a major review of the primary and secondary school curriculum to meet the developmental needs of the country, which led to the development of the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM). The New English Language Curriculum was implemented in schools beginning in 1988, based on a communicative model of language teaching learning.

The objectives of the Secondary English Language Programme are to enable students to:

- listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations;
- speak effectively on a variety of topics;
- read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment and;
- write effectively for different purposes.

The syllabus identifies skills to be "taught through specified topics which are based on settings selected for the secondary school programme." (Ministry of Education 1989b: 1). For example, under Reading there is a list of skills such as "Read and understand instructions on how to play football, badminton and how to run a relay team. Under Listening and Speaking, skills such as "Ask for and give information on the physical features of the library and canteen in the school and what one can

and cannot do in these places". Then there are lists of grammatical items to be taught for each school year, a vocabulary list organised around the topics, and selected sounds of the English language for pronunciation practice. The topics form the content base through which these items should be taught.

The teaching approach suggested involves integration of skills, grammar items, the sound system and vocabulary, using the topics as a context. In addition "moral values and literary elements should also be infused in an integrated manner in the lesson through the selection of suitable materials and activities" (Ministry of Education 1989b:3). Teachers were also told to 'encourage and stimulate students to think and question through the use of challenging and thought provoking stimuli and meaningful activities" (Ministry of Education 1990:5).

There was some backtracking where the teaching of grammar was concerned. CDC first advocated that the grammar should be taught "in context and in a meaningful way ... [and not] in isolation or as discrete items" (Ministry of Education 1987:8). However, the introductory notes of the curriculum for Year Four stated that "grammar items can also be taught in isolation if teachers feel it necessary to do so" (Ministry of Education 1989b:4).

The proposed teaching methodology was based on communicative strategies, and advocated a shift from the teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered one. Learner-centered and interactive strategies such as group work, pair work, projects and problem-solving activities were to be used. This again represented a major shift for teachers who had been used to a very teacher-centered mode of teaching.

2 Teaching skills or teaching topics?

Research by Pillay (1995) indicated that the English Language teachers found the teaching of the new syllabus problematic. Her interviews revealed that teachers discussed the teaching of the syllabus in terms of teaching the topic instead of teaching the skills.

We are always used to you know the grammarian type of, way of teaching English. Teach English, understood you have to teach grammar. Now suddenly they asked you to teach, there is nothing concrete. They just give us a topic football. So we don't know really how far in-depth we are to go into that topic.

The syllabus is too wide. There are a large number of topics to be covered. It would be more effective if there were fewer topics to be covered. Then we really have time to put that across. Now it's really rushed to you know to cover and these are actually topics.

Because PMR questions and textbook questions are completely different. You know, what they learn in the textbook - rice cooker is not going to come out in your PMR, is it? No. They are going to give you four passages. They are going to give you language forms and functions. which is not even stressed on in the textbook and then they have twenty questions on grammar, which is also not stressed in the textbook, so how are you going to learn textbook and pick up? How are you going to answer your PMR questions?

The teaching of grammar also emerged as a problem area. The teachers appear to be unclear of the role of grammar in the new curriculum and also reveal a lack of understanding of how grammar is to be integrated into the English lesson.

Right, mention grammar. Are we supposed to touch on it? Are we supposed to do it indirectly, bring it out indirectly that kind? We find it really difficult because there is nothing concrete where we can teach like previously we were teaching on past continuous. Zero in on past continuous, give exercises based on it. But here it's kind of mixed up with everything, all turned into one.

I feel that KBSM teaching of English, kind of retards the pupils. As a language teacher, I feel that whatever comes to a language teacher, be it Bahasa or English, it must come with grammar. Otherwise the girls won't be able to write proper sentences. Come back to square one again, when you mark them you have to look at the grammar point of view. So I feel that if you learn language, you should start from the grammatical side of it.

So what I do, is I have grammar by itself, like what I did yesterday. OK. I teach, OK, the main topic, let's say about rice cookers. After I finish the topic, I normally pick out one grammar topic and stretch it for a few days, lah. I give them the rules, the exception to the rules and give them the exercises.... I teach the topic, then I do grammar.

Research by Ratnawati Mohd Asraf (1996) reveals similar concerns among the teachers in her survey, who expressed doubts about the integration of grammar within the framework of topics or themes. One, for example, commented:

The syllabus today focusses more on themes and functions. It says that we should teach grammar indirectly. However, I found this not effective in many cases. I think we should focus on grammar. This way, students can master the English grammar easier. (1996:11)

These data, together with our observations in Malaysian schools, have convinced us that teachers have problems teaching a syllabus which attempts to integrate skills and grammar using the topic as a medium. This paper attempts to analyse the possible causes of these problems by analysing the English language curriculum specifications, the textbooks and the examination format, all of which could contribute to interpretations of syllabus as expressed by the teachers.

3 Curriculum Components

3.1 The Syllabus

The traditional view of the syllabus is "that [it is a statement of content which is used as the basis for planning courses of various kinds, and that the task of the syllabus designer is to select and grade this content" (Nunan 1988:6). Language use, however, is a complex activity involving many different components. Every time we communicate, we have something to communicate (a topic), and a purpose for communicating it (a function). We use vocabulary items and grammatical structures to create utterances, and these utterances link together to form a particular type of text. To produce or understand the utterances, we need to use a variety of processing skills. All these components will inevitably be present in any language activity.

topic	subject matter, what is talked about	eg. a car crash, traffic, dieting
functions	the purposes for which utterances are used	eg. to apologise, to define, to explain
vocabulary structures	words and their meanings grammatical forms	eg. 'blue', 'revitalise', 'merger'

genres	the type of text, spoken or written	eg. past continuous, plural, relative clauses
microskills	the skills required to process utterances	eg. a letter, an advertisement, a lecture
		eg. skimming, identifying main points, emphasizing through use of stress

In designing a syllabus, one of the major concerns is how to organise these different components. If a syllabus is to form an effective basis for planning a course, it must be organised systematically:

... a syllabus presupposes a design which specifically facilitates learning, not simply a random joining together of elements with no particular cohesion or system.... Whatever else we may not know about learning, we do know that what can be made systematic by the learner is more likely to be learnt than random elements. (Brumfit 1984:98)

A mere listing of structures, vocabulary items, functions, microskills and so on does not provide a systematic framework for organising the content of a course. To achieve this, the approach normally taken is to use one of the components as the central organising principle of the syllabus. A structural syllabus, for example, takes grammatical structures as its starting point. The other components are not necessarily neglected, but are fitted into units that are based on structural content. Similarly, a functional syllabus starts with an organisation based on functions, and structures, microskills and so on are arranged around those functions.

We have already noted that the English Language Syllabus for the KBSM appears to be skills based. The syllabus provides 'skill specifications' for listening, speaking, reading and writing. For each of these, however, the actual specifications tend to be identical, apart from the verbs at the beginning of each item which identify the skill involved. For example, in the Form IV syllabus, we can match the following items:

1.4 Listen to and understand, and ask for and give *instructions on how to fix things, such as a leaky tap.*

2.4 Read and understand in *instructions on how to fix things, such as a leaky tap.*

3.3 Write *instructions on how to fix Things, such as a leaky tap.*

(Ministry of Education 1989b)

This pattern occurs throughout the syllabus, and is presumably intended to facilitate the integration of skills. The specification above would lead us to expect a unit on 'instructions on how to fix things, such as a leaky tap', which would incorporate all four skills. In terms of syllabus organisation, then, the units are defined not by the skills, but by the remaining part of the syllabus item.

When we look more closely at these skill specifications, however, they turn out to involve a diverse mixture of elements. In the example above, for example, "instructions" indicates a function, and "a leaky tap" indicates a topic. The examples overleaf show wide variation in the content of the syllabus items; the first three are from the Form I syllabus, and the others from Form IV.

It appears, then, that the skill specifications do not in fact define skills, but rather involve an assortment of different types of syllabus element.

This approach to syllabus specification makes it difficult to see what is supposed to be the main organising principle of the syllabus, and creates a number of problems for the teacher or textbook writer. Each skill specification identifies a particular combination of different types of component, and by doing so, precludes other possible combinations. For example, the Form W syllabus covers instructions, but does not associate them with manuals, which appear in a different syllabus item. Similarly, descriptions of events are not associated with stories, and descriptions of processes and procedures are not associated with talks. The microskill of locating cause and effect relationships is specified in combination with stories on moral values, but not with talks, reports or letters. Conversely, some of the combinations which are presented in the syllabus seem highly implausible. The Form IV syllabus, for example, has listening objectives associated with written texts such as newspaper reports, charts, letters and manuals, and reading objectives associated with spoken texts such as radio and TV messages and talks.

	Macroskill	Microskill	Genre	Function	Topic
1.24	Listen to and understand			descriptions	of flowering plants and pets
2.5	Read and understand	and locate main and supporting ideas and details	in stories		on courage, charity and unity
3.9	Write		messages to friends	expressing thanks	
1.10	Listen to and understand, and ask for and give		information contained in formal letters	of enquiry and complaint	
2.13	Read and understand	and follow sequence of events		in descriptions of processes and procedures	such as the recycling of material
3.12		Make and expand notes	on talks		on current issues, such as consumerism and health care

Without a systematic arrangement of syllabus elements, there is also no clear principle for sequencing the content of the language course. If we compare the syllabus content from year to year, it is evident that many areas are repeated. Form 1, for example, deals with the description of places in the school, Form IV with tourist spots in the ASEAN region, and Form V -with famous places in the world. All these involve the same function, describing places, but the scope of the description widens from the

immediate environment, to the region and the world. This gradually widening context is a feature found throughout the KBSM curriculum, but in the case of English language, it is not at all obvious that it corresponds to any increase in linguistic difficulty. There is no reason to expect that 'local' topics will involve more complex grammatical structure or more sophisticated language skills than 'global' topics.

The syllabus states that

Language skills need to be built up cumulatively and treated in a spiral manner so that repetition and constant use will maximise learning. For example, having taught students a certain skill or a combination of skills, and the grammar items required, the teacher should, subsequently, teach them related skills and grammar items, thus building up the skills and grammar in a cumulative manner. (Ministry of Education 1989b:3)

The syllabus specifications do not, however, give the teacher any help in this. Each syllabus item appears to be self-contained, with no clear relationship to other items. As for grammar, this is listed separately, and the syllabus itself does not suggest how particular grammar items might be integrated with particular skills. Overall, the syllabus specifications appear to constitute a proto syllabus - an unordered inventory of content - rather than a pedagogical syllabus. As Yalden points out:

Lists of items may be necessary, but they do not produce lesson plans. A list of functions, topics and linguistic exponents must be considered the raw version of a communicative syllabus. The process of producing a pedagogical syllabus provides the teacher with material that has been more or less predigested, and from which it is possible to proceed more or less directly to classroom interaction. (Yalden 1983:143)

Given that the syllabus specifications do not themselves provide guidance for teachers on how to structure and sequence the content of their teaching, the role of the textbook takes on greater significance as a resource to help teachers plan their lessons effectively.

3.2 The Textbooks

Textbooks play a critical role in curriculum innovation as they are the first conceptualization of the syllabus that the teacher encounters. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that the period of curriculum change is often marked by uncertainty and insecurity for teachers because it disturbs the routines that they have built up over the years. Hence textbooks can be an important agent of change, since clearly defined materials can give teachers a sense of security and confidence as they navigate their way through the innovation (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994). Further, textbooks can be one of the ways through which education authorities can ensure that a common curriculum is implemented across diverse settings (Ball and Cohen: 1996).

Research by Pillay (1995) showed that with the exception of teachers from urban schools, most Malaysian teachers depend to a large extent on textbooks, as the nature of their job does not allow them the luxury of developing their own materials. Further, in schools where teachers have not been trained to teach English, or in schools where teachers have very little access to other teaching materials, the textbook helps define the curriculum. So do the textbooks support the intentions of the KBSM curriculum design?

An examination of the textbooks for Form Four show that the units are organised around the topics - SEA games, stories on the moral value of diligence, informal letters to the newspaper, and so on. Within each unit, the skills and grammar items are treated separately in different sections. For example, in one textbook, a unit on the SEA games starts with students listening to a conversation on the opening ceremony of the SEA Games, followed by a series of speaking tasks which require students to either ask each other questions or describe pictures of events in the games. These tasks are then followed by a section on grammar focusing on prepositions of time, and a reading passage about the closing ceremony. The unit concludes with a writing task which requires students to expand notes on the opening ceremony of the SEA Games into an essay; the audience and purpose of the essay, however, are not clearly stated.

It appears that hardly any link is established between one section and the next. Skills or tasks covered in one section are not developed or expanded in the next. Similarly, grammar is often treated in isolation and not developed from any of the texts used, a pattern which is repeated throughout the four textbooks that we analysed. The isolation of the grammar may perhaps arise from the nature of the syllabus specifications, in which grammar is listed separately from the skills and topics. Ideally, the syllabus should identify the grammar which would arise naturally in performing the activities listed in the skills specifications. For example, in dealing with a skill such as giving descriptions of tourist spots, we would naturally need to use (among other things) prepositions of location. Often, however, we find that the grammar listed in the syllabus does not match with the language which would naturally arise from the topics and skills. So we end up with a situation where the textbook writer has to force the grammar into units where it does not naturally fit, in order to fulfill the requirements of the syllabus.

Overall, the various sections in each textbook unit to all intents and purposes stand on their own, with very little development and continuity between them. They offer little help to the teacher who is faced with the problem of integrating the various skills and grammar items. The only consistent feature in each unit appears to be the topic, and this may explain why teachers interpret the syllabus in terms of teaching the topic, rather than integrating topic, skills and grammar items.

We also find a fairly limited range of different text types used in the textbooks. There is a high proportion of narrative texts, including short stories and extracts from novels, and letters and conversations also occur frequently. However, the texts do not always reflect the range that would be found in real life. For example, where in real life would we come across instructions on how to repair things (such as a leaky tap)? Written instructions might be found in a manual, a DIY book, or perhaps a column in a home magazine, and spoken instructions might occur when one person talks another person through a particular job. Yet a textbook may include a short story or conversation about somebody repairing a leaky tap. The topic - repairing a leaky tap - is maintained, but the text type - instructions - has been lost. Yet surely the intention of the syllabus is that a student should be able to understand or give instructions, not that they should be able to talk about the topic of leaky taps. A conversation about a leaky tap will not give the students practice in the way that instructions are organised and presented, or in the language used for giving instructions. In general, the texts found in the textbooks tend to reflect the topic very faithfully, but do not always reflect other aspects of the syllabus, thus hindering the effective development of skills or grammar. In many cases, one is not certain at the end of a unit whether any language skills have been learnt, apart from some vocabulary items related to the topic.

So, it appears that the textbooks comprise a series of activities which have been strung together to reflect the topic rather than to develop the language skills in the cumulative and spiral manner that

was stated in the syllabus. Neither do they give the teacher any ideas of how to integrate the grammar with the skills and topics.

3.3 The Examination

The format of the SPM examination in English language has recently changed to amalgamate the 1322 and 1119 papers, and consequently there are no previous papers to consider. However, the table of specifications (Ministry of Education 1995) gives an indication of the content of the new exam. This shows a division into three papers, each of which is designed to assess "all the topics and skills in the syllabus" for the following areas:

Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Text comprehension	Writing skills	Reading
Language usage and grammar	(guided and free)	Speaking
Language forms and functions	Summary writing skills	

These headings do not directly match those used in the syllabus specifications, so it is not always easy to see precisely which topics and skills should be included in which paper. The more detailed description of Paper I makes it clear that, like Paper I in previous years, the primary focus is on reading comprehension and grammar. What, then, is the role of the topics?

If we consider the 1996 examination, we find only four places where they might be significant, the two reading texts in Paper 1, and the reading text and writing tasks in Paper 2. These were on the following topics:

Paper 1	reading text	Hari Raya overseas
	reading text	environmental pollution
Paper 2	reading text	deer farming
	writing task	account of a school trip or speech on a healthy lifestyle

Only one of these, however, relates closely to the Form V syllabus: the reading text on environmental pollution reflects the objective concerning "articles on environmental issues, such as waste disposal". The students' reading and writing skills were not tested in relation to many of the topics from the Form V syllabus, such as *famous places of the world*, *prominent personalities in the world*, *class projects*, *do-it-yourself kits*, *child abuse or special occasions, such as World Health Day*.

The emphasis on topic which we see in the syllabus and textbooks is not, then, reflected in the examination, which focuses instead on skills and grammar. This may account for ~views among teachers similar to that quoted earlier: "You know, what they learn in the textbook - rice cooker is not going to come out in your PMR." Put this way, the fallacy is evident. An English language examination should be testing the students' ability to use the English language, not their knowledge of particular topics such as rice cookers, flowering plants, the SEA Games, unemployment or child

abuse. Similarly, topics are important in the English classroom primarily as a carrier for teaching language skills, not for their own sake. So how do we teach language through topics, rather than teaching the topics themselves?

4 Integrating Topics, Grammar and Skills

4.1 Topics

Focusing on topic in a language syllabus can be associated with two very different views of syllabus design: product-oriented and process-oriented.

Product syllabuses are those in which the focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction, while process syllabuses are those which focus on the learning experiences themselves. (Nunan 1988:27)

Most of the discussion of topic-oriented teaching has been in relation to process syllabuses, in which there is no selection and organisation of language content. In other words, a process syllabus does not specify what language skills, functions, structures or vocabulary should be taught or learnt. In this approach, topic-oriented teaching "seeks to place content and theme in first place and to derive all further decisions... from that selection of content." (Edelhoff 1981: 51) Clearly, though, this is not the approach which the KBSM syllabus takes, since it does provide a predetermined specification of language content.

The KBSM syllabus is product-oriented, and there has been little discussion of the role of topic within a product syllabus. One reason for this may be that topic syllabuses simply do not lend themselves to this approach. As Long and Crookes point out, "there is ... no obvious way to grade or sequence topics, given the impossibility of distinguishing their boundaries or predicting what they involve." (1993:24) One possible strategy is that suggested by Dubin and Olshtain (1986), who deal with the integration of topics with other syllabus components. In their model, content is subdivided into language content (grammar and notions), thematic content (themes and topics), and situational content (sociocultural functions). Any of these categories could provide the basis for syllabus organisation. In a thematic organisation, a particular topic would be selected, and items from the lists of grammar and functions would then be matched to the topic. A unit on shopping, for example, might include the function of asking for information on prices, brands and sizes, and the grammar items required to do this might include quantifiers and question forms. The key principle is that items from the different syllabus inventories are selected, not at random, but by carefully considering how they may fit together to form a coherent unit in which each component supports the others. This matching of different syllabus components is an issue to which we will return later.

4.2 Grammar

As Dubin and Olshtain point out, the syllabus could equally well be organised around the grammar items, and this has the advantage that:

the linguistic inventory has traditionally been organised in a certain sequence so it fits everyone's cultural expectations. Like reciting the alphabet, it seems natural and basic. (Dubin and Olshtain 1986: 110).

Communicative syllabuses have tended to avoid this type of organisation, and until recently, to downplay the role of grammar overall. This may, however, cause problems for both teachers and learners. In discussing the introduction of a new course in Arab schools, Widdowson (1986) comments that the use of a communicative approach:

... deprives the learners in this case of the explicit grammatical directions which previously controlled and guided their progress and requires them to find their own way. This has led to some degree of disorientation. (1986:42)

The quotations at the beginning of this paper indicate that teachers too can feel disoriented by the change from a grammatical syllabus to one in which they must 'find their own way'.

In the early days of communicative teaching, grammar tended to be neglected. The belief was that learners would 'pick up' grammar through participating in authentic communicative activities. A number of writers are now expressing concern about this view:

It turns out that learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities. The grammar, which they must obviously acquire somehow as a necessary resource for use, proves elusive. So quite often the situation arises where learners acquire a fairly patchy and imperfect repertoire of performance which is not supported by an underlying competence. (Widdowson 1990: 161)

A similar warning is given by Batstone:

Unless we can fashion classroom interaction and language use very carefully, opportunities for language use will turn out to be opportunities for language abuse, with every chance that grammar will be avoided wherever possible, leading to the proceduralization of a language system which is seriously degenerate. (Batstone 1994:46)

Batstone draws a distinction between 'process teaching' and 'process activity'. Process teaching involves activities which are carefully designed to ensure that learners use and extend their linguistic resources, whereas process activity is the "unregulated production of language" with no clear purpose or guidance (Batstone 1994:78). While communicative teaching rejects the traditional focus on form alone, with no regard for meaning, focusing on meaning alone, with no regard for form, may be equally unsatisfactory:

... when students are required to communicate to do a task, but have not been provided with adequate linguistic means for the purpose, they develop communication strategies which over time result in a pidgin. (Johnson 1996: 134)

The Malaysian teachers surveyed by Pillay (1995) and Mohd Asraf (1996) who expressed dissatisfaction with the use of 'grammar in context' were, we feel, probably reacting against this kind of unfocussed activity. The solution, however, is not a return to the sterility of grammar in isolation, but a reconsideration of how grammar can be effectively taught and learnt in context.

Johnson (1996) compares language learning with the learning of other skills, such as driving a car. Learner drivers may be able to change gear, for instance, only in favourable conditions, with plenty of time to think about what they are doing. The operation requires their full attention, and they may be unable to cope with anything else while they are engaged in it. With time, however, the actions involved become automatic, and a qualified driver can change gear at greater speed and in more

challenging conditions. With experience, a driver becomes able to change gear almost without thinking about it, while engaged in other activities such as chatting, rolling down the window and finding the change for a toll booth. The skill of changing gear has been *automise* (or proceduralised). This pattern is found in the learning of many skills. Actions which at first require full attention gradually become automatic, freeing a person to give their attention to other activities.

Automisation of a skill requires both time, and practice under a range of increasingly complex conditions. The teaching of grammar, however, often fails to meet these requirements. Learners are frequently given a short period of practice in which they focus on one particular grammar point, usually with ample time to think about their answers. But the practice tends to stop there. When they are required to participate in a communicative activity which involves thinking about what to say, using a range of different grammar and vocabulary, and responding at speed. The learners' grammar seems to fall to pieces. This is not surprising. We might as well expect a learner driver, after ten minutes of practice on a quiet suburban street, to cope with speeding rush hour traffic on a highway in a rainstorm.

One advantage, then, of integrating grammar with skills activity is that in this way it becomes possible to facilitate automisation. The grammar is recycled in various different activities, providing time for it to be reinforced. At first the learners' attention may be focused on a particular language point, but gradually the tasks should demand more and more in terms of speed, flexibility and complexity. The learners still need to use the language point, but are being forced to cope with other demands as well. Activities should involve what Johnson (1996) calls "form defocus", in which the learners' attention is deflected away from the form itself, as they meet the challenge of responding to other aspects of the task. Well-designed communicative activities can thus provide the conditions for automisation to take place.

This will only happen, however, if the activities are designed in such a way that the use of the grammatical item arises naturally from the communicative demands inherent in them. If learners are able to carry out the activity successfully without using the grammatical item, then it is likely that they will do so, and there will be no development of their grammatical system. A first requirement, then, is that the grammatical item should occur naturally as part of the activity, reflecting real life use. This however, may not be enough, as learners may find alternative ways to achieve communication. Ideally, as Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) argue, the activity should be designed so that it cannot be carried out successfully without using the grammatical item. Although in some cases it may prove impossible to meet this requirement, it is still advisable to aim for it in designing materials for grammar practice.

4.3 Integrated skills

One of the main advantages of integrating skills is that it reflects the way that language is used in real life, and therefore makes it easier to develop in learners the ability to cope with real-life operating conditions. As we have seen, this is an essential part of automisation. We need to distinguish, then, between 'artificial' and 'authentic' integration. Byrne draws attention to a common form of integration in which material presented through one skill is reinforced through activities involving one or more other skills. As he comments, this approach does not "integrate language skills in such a way that the contexts for practising and using all the four skills are established naturally" (Byrne 1981: 108). There are many examples in the textbooks where there is no natural progression from one skills section to the next, the only link between them being that they focus on the same topic. To achieve authentic integration, activities need to reflect the way that communication takes place in real life, thus

establishing a genuine purpose for each activity. As McDonough and Shaw argue, integrating skills makes it possible for learners to "gain a deeper understanding of how communication works in the foreign language as well as becoming more motivated when they see the value of performing meaningful tasks and activities in the classroom" (1993:202).

We also need to distinguish between what Selinker and Tomlin (1986) call 'parallel' and 'serial' integration. Parallel integration occurs when an activity involves two or more skills simultaneously. For example, in real life we might take part in a telephone conversation while taking down a message (speaking, listening and writing), or we might read a recipe and note the ingredients needed (reading and writing). Serial integration occurs when one activity develops out of another, each involving different skills. For example, after reading an advertisement for a product, we might write a letter placing an order; on receiving the goods, we might then have to phone the company to make a complaint; with luck, we might perhaps receive a refund and a letter of apology! The key point here is that activities do not follow each other at random, but are linked naturally together. The outcome of one activity provides the impetus for the succeeding activity.

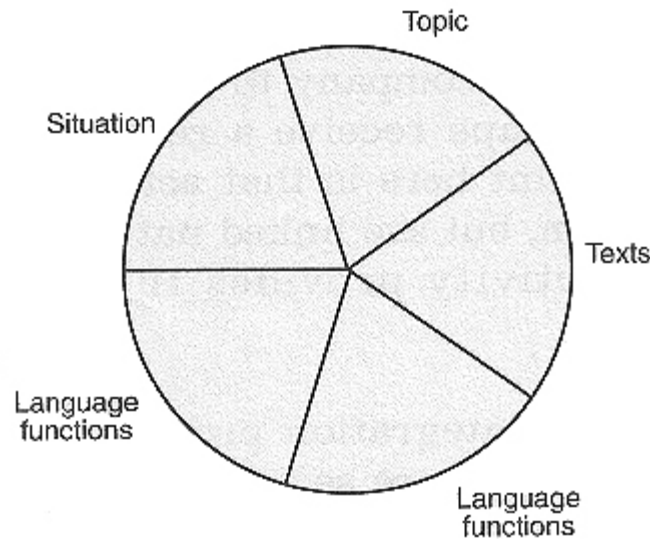
The use of serial integration provides task *continuity*, through which "activities are sequenced, not only according to their complexity ..., but also by the logic of themes and learning pathways" (Nunan 1989:19). The 'logic of themes' brings us back to the role of the topic in contributing to the coherence of a teaching unit. The topic should not be regarded as subject matter to be mastered for its own sake, but neither is it merely a decorative frill. Rather, it should be the cement which holds together a carefully structured sequence of activities.

5 Planning a teaching unit

The preceding discussion suggests several criteria that need to be considered in the design of a teaching unit:

- **Task continuity:** Activities should build one upon another to provide purpose and coherence.
- **Authenticity:** Texts and activities should reflect the way that language is used in real life.
- **Language focus:** The unit should provide opportunities to identify and practise language patterns.
- **Progression:** Activities should place gradually increasing demands on learners so as to encourage automatising.

An integrated teaching unit will involve the interweaving of several different components, including the *topic* and *situation* around which the activities are built, the written and spoken texts which learners must process as part of the activities, and the language *forms* and *functions* involved in understanding and producing those texts. To create a genuinely integrated series of activities, all these components must fit naturally together, reflecting the way that language is used in real life.



The starting point for materials design can potentially be any of these components, but whichever we choose, the next steps involve considering how the other components can be matched to it. For example, if we start by deciding on the topic 'child abuse', then we need to ask:

- In what real-life *situation* would people talk, read or write about child abuse?
- What sort of texts would be involved in this situation (eg. Letters, interviews, newspaper articles, radio talks)?
- What would be the most important language functions required (eg. complaining, describing, reporting, recommending)?
- What would be the most important language forms involved?

Similarly, if we start by deciding to focus on the grammatical item relative clauses, then we need to ask:

- For what *functions* do we use relative clauses in real life (eg. identifying, defining, classifying) ?
- In what *situation* would we need to use this function?
- What sort of texts would be involved?
- What are the possible *topics* that might be involved?

Achieving a good match between these components is probably the greatest challenge in designing integrated materials, and requires considerable time and effort. When the pieces fit together, it becomes possible to create activities that are interesting, realistic and motivating, and which provide opportunities for students to extend both their grammatical ability and their language skills in meaningful contexts. For the classroom teacher, the extent to which this can be achieved unaided is probably limited, because of pressures on their time. Syllabuses and textbooks, however, could make the task easier by presenting a clearer picture of the potential interrelationships between topics, skills and grammar, thus showing how topics can be used, not as the main teaching point of a unit, but as the carrier for language content.

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