

TASK-BASED SYLLABUS

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESIGNING A TASK-BASED SYLLABUS IN AN EFL SETTING

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching 7

Teachers and Learners' roles in CLT 12

Characteristics of CLT 13

Current Trends of CLT 14

CHAPTER TWO

Task-based Language Teaching 17

Definition of Task 19

Division of Tasks 21

Classification of Tasks 23

CHAPTER THREE

Syllabus Design 24

Syllabus Types 29

CHAPTER FOUR

Task-Based Syllabus 32

Components and Steps for Task-Based Syllabus Design 34

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions 36

References 39

TASK-BASED SYLLABUS

Abstract

Task-based syllabus serves to the organization of teaching around purposeful tasks that learners perform in the classroom and complete using the target language. This syllabus type adopts task-based instruction principles and incorporates communicative language teaching features; for this reason, its selection of content is done under the premise of enhancing learners' communicative competence. It also advocates the use of authentic materials and contextualized samples of language that facilitate language learning. The syllabus designer arranges a set of target tasks from an analysis of learners' needs rather than making a list of isolated grammatical forms to be covered during a course. A task-based syllabus is oriented to design a plan for teaching within a timeframe in which learners are engaged in communicative activities that reproduce communicative acts that are likely to be encounter in real situations. Additionally, it procures to involve learners in extensive language practice; but it is necessary that the teacher recognizes the skills and knowledge needed to carry out the tasks. The task-based syllabus designer should sequence and integrate communication activities with exercises that enable learners to develop the abilities expected to achieve at the end of the course. Nowadays, in our setting, students are required to be communicatively competent in the globalized world; therefore; new teaching and organization of teaching must be adapted and adopted in our high schools in order to lead learners to a meaningful learning of the foreign language.

Key words: task, syllabus, communicative competence, meaningful learning.

TASK-BASED SYLLABUS

Resumen

Task-based syllabus ha sido descrito como un programa de estudios basado en tareas, en el cual la enseñanza se organiza en torno a trabajos que cuentan con un propósito bien definido que los alumnos ejecutan y completan en el aula de clase a través del uso de la lengua extranjera. Este tipo de programa o syllabus adopta los principios de task-based instruction, e incorpora características de enseñanza pertenecientes al enfoque comunicativo; por esta razón, la selección de contenidos se realiza bajo la premisa de optimizar la competencia comunicativa de los estudiantes. También defiende el uso de materiales auténticos y ejemplos contextualizados del lenguaje que faciliten el aprendizaje. El diseñador de un programa de estudios crea una serie de tareas a partir de un análisis de las necesidades de los estudiantes, en lugar de hacer una lista de estructuras gramaticales para trabajar durante un curso. Task-based syllabus está orientado a diseñar un plan de enseñanza que permita a los estudiantes participar en actividades de comunicación que imiten actos de comunicación reales a los cuales deben enfrentarse en la vida cotidiana. Además, se procura involucrar a los estudiantes en la práctica del idioma, pero es necesario que el maestro reconozca las habilidades y conocimientos necesarios para llevar a cabo las tareas. El profesor debe trazar una secuencia e integrar actividades enfocadas a la comunicación con ejercicios que permitan a los estudiantes desarrollar las habilidades que se desea fortalecer a lo largo del curso. Hoy en día, en nuestro medio, los estudiantes deben ser comunicativamente competentes en el mundo globalizado, por lo tanto, una nueva enseñanza y organización de la misma deben ser adaptadas y adoptadas en nuestros colegios con el fin de guiar a los estudiantes a un aprendizaje significativo de la lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: tareas, programa de estudios, competencia comunicativa, aprendizaje significativo.

The Importance of Designing a Task-Based Syllabus in an EFL Setting

This research paper is intended to determine how the design of a task-based syllabus could be functional when carrying out a course in an EFL setting. First of all, it is necessary to know what syllabus design means, and how to develop one after having decided what type of syllabus would be suitable and effective taking into account the teaching and learning conditions. When organizing a course based on task-based features, learners are exposed to communicative activities which involve real-life situations, meaningful language, authentic materials, contextualized samples of language, and purposeful tasks for students to perform.

Implementing a task-based syllabus involves incorporating a communicative approach into our organization of teaching. For this reason, the general organization of this research paper consists of an overview of communicative language teaching, the roles of teachers and learners, and characteristics of CLT followed by the current trends for language teaching in communicative approaches; in this part there is more emphasis on task-based instruction by providing the different definitions of task and an explanation of tasks types. Subsequently, the paper presents a background on syllabus design, the components of a syllabus, the principles for syllabus design, and types of syllabi mentioning their main features. Finally there is an analysis of the prevalence of task-based syllabus in an EFL setting by highlighting its strengths.

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has emerged around the concern of involving learners in real-life situations; in other words, it emphasizes communication in the target language inside and outside the classroom. Around the 1970's, the interest in developing communicative teaching grew based on the idea of implementing authentic language and engaging students in real communication. Larsen-Freeman (2000) claimed that CLT is the

response to traditional twentieth century methodologies since it starts from a theory of language as communication where accuracy and fluency are equally important. Savignon, cited by Larsen-Freeman (2000) advanced the concept of CLT making reference to a central theoretical concept called *communicative competence* established by Hymes in 1972 to characterize the use of the second language (L2) in social contexts. Hymes' notion of communicative competence was the result of the disapproval of the linguistic theory held by Noam Chomsky in 1965 who claimed that the central point of linguistic theory was to distinguish the abilities that speakers of a language possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in the language.

Hymes (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) argued that structural theories of language need to incorporate communication and culture; it means a focus on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of rules. Hymes' communicative competence and his concern with the integration of language, communication, and culture have been seen as the equivalent principle of Halliday's functional account of language in 1978 that complements Hymes' view of communicative competence. Halliday stated "only through the study of language in use are all the functions of language, and therefore all the components of meaning, brought into focus". (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 70)

Widdowson in 1978 (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) stated that it is necessary to pay central attention to the ability to use language for different purposes in any kind of communicative acts; or real-life situations that teachers arrange in class that are likely to be encountered outside the formal teaching setting. Regarding those views, the communicative competence incorporates the ability to use grammar rules, and the ability to use the language in practical, realistic, and functional situations. The communicative competence focuses on learners' needs to communicate and establish social relationships. Savignon (1991) stated that learners should learn the language through conversation rather than through the traditional formal scrutiny

of forms and translation. By this time, Savignon worked on a research project of 18-week, 5-hour-per-week program using the term communicative competence to describe the ability of adult French language learners to interact with each other. By the end of the instructional period, the learners who practiced communication instead of pattern drills sessions did not show sufficient accuracy when performing discrete-point tests. On the other hand, they had a significant improvement on their communicative competence in terms of fluency, and comprehensibility in spontaneous oral communicative tasks; and they surpassed those learners who did not have such practice. Celce-Murcia (2001) said that according to the information found from this research carried out by Savignon, it is possible to realize that the positive learners' response to activities which are focused on meaning exceed learners' response to formal instruction focused on teaching structural forms.

Larsen-Freeman (2000) cited Canale and Swain (1980) who said that the results obtained in this study were the basis for the recognition of four dimensions of communicative competence. Larsen-Freeman (2000) explained the four dimensions: *Grammatical competence* refers to the mastery of grammatical and lexical components. In other words, it also refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence. *Sociolinguistic competence* points to the understanding and production of utterances in the social context in which communication takes place. It includes role relationships among participants, and communicative purposes. *Discourse competence* makes reference to the mastery of grammatical forms and meanings to represent the entire relationship in a discourse or text. And, *strategic competence* refers to the strategies that speakers exploit to initiate, conclude, maintain, mend, and redirect communication. Savignon (2002) claimed that all the components are closely related

to each other, and they cannot be developed or measured individually because each one is crucial for the overall development of the communicative competence.

Savignon (2002) also gave a broader explanation of the four dimensions of communicative competence saying that the grammatical competence refers to the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological feature of a language in order to use them in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning. Discourse competence makes reference to the general comprehension of any kind of text, discourse, or utterances either written or spoken such as a poem, a telephone conversation, a lecture, an e-mail message. It involves four concepts which contribute to the interpretation of meaning of a text. For example, the identification of isolated sounds or words is known as *bottom-up processing*. On the other hand, the understanding of the general purpose facilitates the interpretation of isolated sounds or words; this is known as *top-down processing*. Moreover, *coherence* and *cohesion* are related to discourse competence as well. Text coherence refers to the relation of every single utterance in a text for the establishment of a global meaning. It is essential for the interpretation of individual sentences that make up the text. Likewise, cohesion is completed when making use of structural links.

Sociocultural competence engages linguistic forms and social rules of language use. It entails the understanding of social contexts in which language takes place, and communication and participants' interaction are stimulated. Thus, sociocultural competence refers to any intercultural exchange through considering different social conventions. These conventions cause an influence on how messages are interpreted. This is the reason why, it emphasizes the relevance of developing a cultural awareness and becoming open-minded towards other cultures, and participating in active

negotiation of meaning in order to establish comprehension. At this point, Savignon (2002) concluded that the theory of the “ideal native speaker” emerged; used to make reference to someone who knows perfectly the language and is able to use it appropriately in any social interaction the person is immersed. Strategic competence refers to the coping strategies learnt through practice and experience in grammatical, discourse, and sociocultural competence.

With reference to the grammatical competence, Canale and Swain (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) suggested that CLT does not deny the relevance that grammar has when proposing a communicative competence component for teaching languages. This is one of the misconceptions that have arisen about what CLT involves. However, there are some good reasons to support the belief that grammar teaching should be avoided. For example, Prabhu (as cited in Thompson, 1996) stated that grammar is simply too complex to be taught; and Krashen (as cited in Thompson, 1996) argued that grammar can be acquired unconsciously through exposure to the language.

Nevertheless, CLT has never excluded explicit attention to grammar if it is required. In fact, CLT proponents have pointed out that “grammar is necessary for communication to take place efficiently” (Thompson, 1996, p. 10). In other words, grammar is a means to build and set up communication. It is currently accepted that an “appropriate amount of class time should be devoted to grammar” (Thompson, 1996, p. 11) but it is necessary to clarify that this position is not a return to traditional approaches and their treatments of grammar rules. Instead, as it was said by Thompson (1996) grammar teaching is focused on learners discovering of forms rather than teacher covering grammar structures. Additionally, learners should be exposed to comprehensible samples of language; in this sense, it is likely that they are able to understand language function and meaning through contextualized teaching. At this point, it is important to

determine the relationship between grammar and communication. As communication in CLT is the goal for teaching, Littlewood (2001) said that it is quite essential to establish what grammar structures would be taught, and how they would be taught in order to serve communication and make language acceptable when speaking and addressing people.

Teachers and Learners' roles in CLT

Larsen-Freeman (2000) claimed that teachers have principally two main roles: The first one is to facilitate communication and provide opportunities to engage learners in activities in which they can interact with the class and materials. The second role is to take action within the learning-teaching group. A set of secondary roles arises from the objectives of the first role since they are narrowly related; and they imply being an organizer of resources and procedures, and a guide or advisor when developing class activities. Additionally, there are further roles assumed for teachers starting from being an analyst, counselor, and group process manager.

Needs analyst. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000) the teacher responds to learner language needs. This can be done informally and personally during each session identifying learners' perception of their leaning style and learning goals. It can also be done formally through providing a needs assessment instrument format containing items about what are learners' motivations for studying languages.

Counselor. Larsen-Freeman (2000) also said that by means of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback the teacher embodies an effective communicator using the target language in order to interconnect speaker's intention and listener's interpretation of the message.

Group process manager. Larsen-Freeman (2000) claimed that in CLT approaches the teacher assumes a less teacher-centered role. The responsibility of the teacher is to organize the classroom appropriately for creating a setting in which communication takes place. Besides teacher should monitor the process of activities and should encourage interaction. However, some

critics point out that this is a very demanding role for non-native teachers who may feel uncomfortable carrying out such procedures without having special training.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000) this issue may cause some level of anxiety on teachers who are accustomed to seeing language teaching as the continuum correction of errors procuring accuracy, and in some other cases, teachers feel less confident addressing classes only in the target language when they do not have enough proficiency in English and so, they may be incapable of providing accurate input. This phenomenon is noticeable in our setting, especially in public institutions where communication is commonly avoided on the part of teachers. On the other hand, students tend to feel insecure when are forced to speak because usually since the beginning of foreign language instruction, they have not been exposed to effective approaches of teaching and they get used to recognizing isolated words or using specific grammar rules.

CLT presents a proposal of the roles that learners are expected to assume inside the classroom. It is thought that learners are more responsible of their own learning due to the less dominant role that teachers adopt. Richards (2006) affirmed that learners should also negotiate meaning by trying out different ways of saying things, and leaning through the feedback they receive when using the language. In short, it can be said that for CLT the main purpose is to foster communicative competence and enable learners to communicate in the target language. In essence, CLT wants to provide learners with opportunities to use the language in a range of functional situations that they may encounter in real-life, in which learners have to look for different communication strategies to use the language appropriately according to the setting (formal or informal) and the participants.

Characteristics of CLT

Richards (2006) said that CLT advocates some features and principles that must be considered when going for a communicative methodology. The most important characteristic is

that almost everything done in CLT has a communicative intent so that, it promotes interaction to establish relationships between learners, learners and teacher, and learners and materials. The selection of materials must be done under the premise of using authentic and meaningful materials in order to present the language in a comprehensible context. Thus, the target language is considered a vehicle to encourage classroom communication, and it does not see language as the plain learning of grammar rules. Even though, the awareness of forms and meanings is only a part of what communicative competence involves. The knowledge of language functions is another aspect that seemed to be relevant. As we know, many language forms can be used to perform a function, and also a single form can be used to perform a variety of functions.

Richards (2006) argued that through negotiation of meaning learners try to understand others and make themselves understood in order to have an effective communication and they should be taught strategies to improve their comprehension. Unlike traditional approaches of language teaching, CLT introduces the concept of *modified input* to replace translation unless it is required. For example, to illustrate vocabulary items that does not have any equivalent in the mother tongue. All four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be worked right from the beginning since in real communication they occur all together; so that negotiation of meaning is activated and this is how speakers can maintain interaction and let the conversation flow. The final characteristic but not the less important, is that learners must be provided with some metalinguistic feedback; in this way, they are guided towards the discovering of their errors. In this sense, errors in CLT are tolerated since they are seen as the natural outcome of the development of communicative skills.

Current Trends of Communicative Language Teaching

Richards (2006) affirmed that the current trends derived from CLT have the similarity of advocating the principles and features that this approach defends. Those Communicative trends

are content-based instruction, competency-based language teaching, cooperative-language learning, and task-based language teaching. The implantation or the choice of such trends depends on various factors including teaching context, learning conditions, age, and goals.

Richards (2006) concluded that their characteristics remain basically the assumptions already set by CLT: language learning is facilitated by interaction and meaningful communication. Teacher provides effective classroom tasks in order to engage learners in active negotiation of meaning, exchanging of opinions and thoughts, and the intention of integrating several language skills. Teacher acts as a facilitator creating opportunities to practice the target language. Learners' attention is focused on meaning rather than form; it means language analysis and reflection with the purpose of discovering rules. Although errors are considered to be as the natural outcome when learning a language; the ultimate goal of leaning is to enable learners to use the language accurately and fluently. Provide authentic materials to serve as a realistic model of language. And collaboration and peer work have an important value in order to allow learner to exchange meaning. To sum up the general objective of these approaches is to teach language through communication rather than for it.

It is imperative to say that the role of new foreign language teachers is to determine and decide which communicative approach would be suitable to apply taking into account EFL conditions such as: large classes, few hours devoted to the teaching of English on the timetable especially at schools because English is not considered a relevant subject to be taught, limited resources that teachers and students have to their disposal, lack of proficiency in the target language on the part of teachers, lack of interest in learning a foreign language, and so forth.

Content-based instruction. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000) content-based instruction (CBI) conceives language as the means to learn something rather than language as the object of study itself. It emphasizes on the use of the target language to learn some other content

or a topic, usually an academic subject matter. Language may be learnt most effectively when it is used to learn other content which is often interesting for learners. In this sense learners could feel more motivated because they know they are learning two things. The selection of teaching content depends on learners' needs and the abilities they want to develop.

Besides, CBI suggests that communicative competence not only involves using the language for conversational purposes; but it also involves the ability to read, discuss, and write about another kind of content related to other fields. For the application of CBI, Larsen-Freeman (2000) claimed that teachers must look for a variety of sources and authentic material about the topic. Generally, the class is divided in groups, and finally learners have to present a final outcome; it could be an essay, a presentation, and others. Teachers make use of comprehension checks or redundancy to exemplify and illustrate the language. Learners may acquire vocabulary as long as it is contextualized.

Nevertheless, considering this overview about what CBI advocates, it may not be suitable to use in an EFL setting such as ours for the reason that for implementing a content instruction, it would be necessary that learners have a high level of proficiency. For example, if we use this approach for teaching English in high schools, students might feel confused and have the sense that there is not any progression or improvement in their learning. Additionally to this, there is a lack of sources and texts available and CBI would be too demanding and challenging for teachers because they must be capable of carrying out classes making use exclusively of the L2; and some high school teachers are not proficient enough in the target language.

Competency-based language teaching. Richards & Rodgers (2001) said that competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) seeks to teach L2 taking into account the social context in which it is spoken. The main goal wanted to achieve through CBLT is enable learners to know and perform the functions of a society. It attempts to satisfy learners' needs and in this

sense teachers should predict what is going to be taught and what language skills they need to work on. Learners are trained with the purpose of developing their competences about knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors which are required for an effective performance in real-life tasks that learners may have to deal with in real communicative situations.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) stated that CBLT has been widely used in ESL settings, and the competences that learners learn to perform are related to their needs and interests; so that they learn practical and specific functions. It considers that competences can be learnt one by one, and in this way learners have a record of what they have been already taught and what still remains to be learnt. On the other hand, the syllabus and content is organized around the subject, and it may include topics such as: work schedules, social language, job application, and the like.

Cooperative-language learning. Larsen-Freeman (2000) said that cooperative learning or collaborative learning considers that learning a language is facilitated by means of interaction and communication in the target language, and learners depend from each other to learn. Jacobs (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) suggested that in cooperative learning, teachers should teach collaborative or social skills, so they can work together effectively. But learners' progress is tested and assessed individually. The aim of making people work in groups is to learn how to get along with different people and be responsible for participating and learning when developing the tasks once they are distributed.

Task-Based Language Teaching

This is the approach of language teaching chosen in this paper to analyze its functionality for organizing a syllabus and determine how it would be beneficial in our context. Larsen-Freeman (2000) argued that task-based instruction or also known as task-based language teaching aims to provide learners with meaningful and contextualized samples of language. Learners have abundant opportunities to interact as they work to complete a task. By interacting learners

establish relationships and have to make use of different means of expressing themselves and conveying information while they work to understand each other. Candlin and Murphy in 1987 (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) affirmed that task-based is basically concerned with language learning, and the forms to present this are problem-solving negotiation tasks. Willis in 1996 (as cited in Richards, 2006) gave an example of a problem-solving task: students are asked to read a letter and have to suggest a solution to writer's problem. Willis also proposed other five types of tasks which as solving-problem tasks could be considered as the basis of task-based teaching.

1. Listing tasks. For example, students might have to make up a list of things they would pack if they were going on a beach vacation.
2. Sorting and ordering. Students work in pairs and make up a list of the most important characteristics of an ideal vacation.
3. Comparing. Students compare ads for two different supermarkets.
4. Sharing personal experience. Students discuss their reactions to an ethical or moral dilemma.
5. Creative tasks. Students prepare plans for decorating a house. (Richards, 2006, p. 33)

Richards (2006) proposed a number of activities that can be carried out inside the classroom and that were developed according to CLT principles. The activities designed attempt to balance accuracy and fluency and above all they focus on achieving communication, practicing language within a context, and using communication strategies. For instance, *information-gap activities* refer to the fact that commonly when people are involved in communication they want to get some kind of information they do not possess. In the same way, learners inside the classroom are engaged in authentic communication when they make use of communicative resources to

obtain information from a classmate. Role plays are examples of information-gap activities in which each person has certain amount of information required by the other and they have to exchange information they know. *Jig-say activities* require learners to be divided into groups and work with part of the information that is given to each group. The class has to put together all the pieces of an activity while they practice with the language. Other activities that focus on the use language resources to complete a task include *task-completion activities* like puzzles or map-reading, *opinion-sharing activities*, and *reasoning-gap activities*.

Definitions of Task

It is necessary to be clear about what a task is. There are several authors who give some contending definitions of task since they consider different aspects of what this term comprises, consequently their interpretations vary. Long (1985) quoted by Nunan (1989) provided the most widely definition of task. In this definition, Long emphasizes on the functionality of tasks since he mentioned a set of real-life situations that through the use of the language can be accomplished.

...a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, [. . .], making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across the road. In other words, by “task” is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.
(Nunan, 2004, p. 2)

Nunan (1989) also presented his interpretation of what a task refers to: “any classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing,

or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 2004, p. 4) Meanwhile, Prabhu quoted by Sánchez (2004) proposed in 1984 the following definition: “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a ‘task’ . (Sánchez, 2004, p. 47)

From these definitions, it can be said that they have some similarities and common features regarding the conception of task. They all agree that tasks are focused on meaning rather than form; they involve establishing interaction with the language and with real and contextualized situations that are likely to be encounter in real world. To set a personal definition, a task is a piece of classroom work whose main purpose must be to engage learners in real-life situations and foster interaction, comprehension, and the accomplishment of a final outcome to be assessed.

Larsen-Freeman (2000) put forward some principles of task-based teaching that were taken from an observation class adapted from Prabhu (1987), with a group of 40 ten-years-old children who were advanced beginners in English. Those principles are:

1. The tasks have a purpose and a clear outcome to achieve.
2. Students should develop a pre-task similar to the following activity they will develop individually later in which they can see the procedure about what they will be asked to do.
3. Teachers make use of whatever language is necessary to ensure students comprehension.
4. Teachers break into smaller steps the processes of activities.
5. Through jigsaw activities students are engaged in listening to different parts of a total set of information in which they have the opportunity to improve their comprehension and speaking skills.

6. Students are provided with more opportunities for authentic and meaningful interaction through the input they receive when carrying out a task.
7. Students should receive feedback on the part of the teacher when completing the task.

In a general idea, task-based instruction bases the learning process on learning by means of doing, to do so teachers are required to encourage learners to develop engaging activities that promote communication, interaction among learners or between teacher and learners, and a significant output on the part of learners. It builds language awareness that contributes to language learning through task performance.

Division of Tasks

Willis in 1996 (as cited in Richards, 2006) proposed that tasks ought to be divided into the following order: *pre-task*, *task cycle* and *language focus*. Those tasks are again oriented to communication and learners' production either written or spoke. Jimenez (2009) provided a comprehensible definition of pre-task saying that it is the preliminary phase that introduces the topic and gives the first step to the accomplishment of the whole activity. The pre-task helps learners to understand the topic and the objective of the task. Besides it is quite important because it creates interest among learners and facilitates the acquisition of new language that may be useful to cope with the task. Some ideas listed by Willis in Richards (2006) to orient a pre-task include brainstorming of ideas about the topic, read a part of a passage or listen to recording without giving away the solution, use pictures, etc.

It is pretty common that foreign language teachers in our context overlook the importance of designing a pre-task since some factors do not contribute to the organization of well-oriented activities. One of those factors could be the insufficient amount of time dedicated to the teaching of English especially in public high schools which leads teachers to prepare a single activity without providing students with the necessary guidance that enables learners to execute the task.

Sometimes teachers also tend to assume that the activity planned would be developed easily and prior work would be needless, and they expect students to produce correct outcomes. At the end of the day, the activity results complicated, not interesting and the outcome is not the expected.

Subsequently, Jimenez (2009) explained that the task cycle is the phase in which learners work in pairs or groups and are given the opportunity to use the language they know. Learners are free to say and express what they want, the key is spontaneity. Willis in Richards (2006) also claimed that learners and teachers work together, being the teacher the guide in order to avoid the possibility of developing fluency at the expense of accuracy. Then, the groups or some pairs are required to report briefly to the whole class their work. The class may take notes about classmates' report or comments.

Lastly, Willis (as cited in Richards, 2006) said that language focus is the language task which leads learners to pay attention to specific language elements taken from the transcript or recording to which learners were exposed to. For example, learners are asked to highlight all the past simple forms they read or heard. They should take notes. Finally teacher gives the directions for practicing based on the language analysis. To say something, learners could work in matching exercises or sentence completion with simple past.

In my perception Willis' proposal is a well-taught technique to organize the procedures to develop a task. Language awareness is worked from the beginning and learners through teacher's guidance are oriented to use meaningful language while the material provided is adequately exploited; it is used to bring a topic to the activity but it also serves to practice the language form; therefore, it embraces focus on form because learners pay attention to contextualized linguistic features, they are engaged in group work, use the grammar learnt in a significant way, and are involved in consciousness-raising tasks.

Classification of Tasks

Richards (2006) exposed that for task-based language teaching tasks could be distinguished in two kinds. The first one is *pedagogical tasks* that are designed to be worked in class and they required the use of specific language or skill, it means that they involved the use of language. According to Nunan (2001) pedagogical tasks are subdivided in two categories: *rehearsal tasks* and *activation tasks*. The first group refers to all classroom work that learners practice in class which is then performed out of it. The second group involves communicative interaction but the task will not be necessarily performed outside the classroom. The goal is to activate the acquisition process. The other kind of tasks is *real-world tasks* that Nunan (2001) also called *target tasks* which as the name implies are tasks commonly found in everyday situations like role plays about a job interview. Nunan (2001) asserted that target or real-world tasks are the kind of things that individuals typically do outside of the classroom.

I personally believe that any activity is useful as long as it advocates CLT principles; it means an activity that is designed in order to achieve communicative purposes, required the use of meaningful language and authentic materials, and is developed within a context. For applying any kind of task, it is important to bear always in mind the principles of task and prepare a classroom activity related to the topic worked and it must suit learners' language needs.

Throughout the analysis carried out of communicative language teaching, it has been exposed the necessity of incorporating communicative approaches into foreign language teaching in order to improve the quality of teaching and move towards current trends of instruction and learning. Language teachers should always be willing to go with the changes that allow them to advance their teaching techniques; and to do so it is possible to integrate features of each communicative approach into their philosophy of teaching; taking the ones that best suit the class

expectations and language needs. It is essential to highlight the importance of providing learners with authentic and meaningful input that leads them to recognize the real use of language in everyday situations. In my opinion, teachers must guide students in their learning process and facilitate communication because being competent in a foreign language no longer means having a lot of grammar and structure knowledge, but being able to initiate or maintain a conversation and use language naturally.

The main features of the current trends of CLT have been mentioned, but with the purpose of taking grounds on this research there is more emphasis on task-based approach, in view of the fact that the reason of this study is determine how valuable is implementing a syllabus which focal point is the incorporation of tasks that may fit into a foreign language setting such as ours. It is important to state in first place an understandable definition of syllabus, considering its components, and the misconceptions that turns around its functionality. Moreover, the description of syllabus types will be presented, stating their proponents, their main characteristics, as well as their weaknesses and feasibilities.

Syllabus Design

Some English language teachers may not give the necessary relevance to the designing of a syllabus due to factors such as lack of knowledge about the existing background regarding TESOL. On the other hand, these teachers may not be English teachers or their knowledge has become obsolete perhaps due to their reduced interest in keep on learning and reading about the recent findings concerning English language teaching. All of this may result in the generation of some misconceptions and wrong ideas about what syllabus design is. In this sense, some teachers do not even care about creating a syllabus and they simply consider textbooks as the unique providers of goals that learners must achieve at the end of the course, the selection of content to teach, or the instruments to assess learners' progress. In other words, they completely disregard

the components of a syllabus. In addition, sometimes some teachers still confuse the methodology with a syllabus. Methodology refers to the choice of the language teaching activities and techniques implemented in class; on the other hand, the syllabus refers to the organization of teaching within a time frame.

To clarify this point, Breen (2001) claimed that a syllabus is a plan which states the goals expected to achieve through teaching and learning. It is composed by four elements: aims, content, methodology and evaluation. In a syllabus the content selected should be specified clearly in order to let learners know what will be worked. Methodology is a component of a syllabus that refers to the variety of techniques applied by teachers to work upon the content. Evaluation concerns the process of assessing learners' outcomes. All teachers follow a syllabus; it could be a pre-designed document or a syllabus that is developed as lessons progress, it means a day-to-day selection of content. Breen (2001) affirmed that preferably a well-planned syllabus should provide a clear construction of knowledge and content that is appropriate to general aims; continuity and sense of orientation for teachers and learners; a real documentation for other teachers about the topics covered in the course; a base for evaluating learners' progress.

Language teacher should keep in mind that designing a syllabus makes part of their responsibilities and it simply demonstrates their professionalism. Besides, a syllabus works for their advantage as long as it is well-organized. For instance, a syllabus can be used more than once with different groups if changes are made to adjust it to new learners' needs; and identify what aspects continue to be relevant for the course and what things could be left out if it is necessary. Additionally, as it facilitates the organization of content, teachers are given the chance to be creative in their planning and prepare everything in advance, and avoid improvisation.

Nunan (1988) also discussed the distinction between syllabus design and methodology. Nunan claimed that syllabus design is concerned with the selection of content and grading,

whereas methodology refers to the selection of tasks and activities that facilitate learning. I agree with Breen and Nunan distinction between the two concepts. Teachers should see the methodology as part of their planning when teaching a course; once the content is chosen and the language needs are identified, it is possible to think about a methodology or approach that best fit the conditions.

In order to design a syllabus correctly, it is important to keep in mind the elements that compose an organized syllabus. According to Gross (2006) these are the basic elements required to include:

1. Course information like course name, class meeting time and course calendar.
2. Identification of needs with the purpose of establishing the objectives. Firstly, put into consideration learners' benefit, what learners will gain from the course. The analysis of learners' needs should be based on age, level, reasons for learning, and it is also possible to include strengths and weaknesses. According to Nunan (1988) when learners share their reasons for learning the language and teachers also express what they hope to achieve in the classroom, this contributes to the exchange of information that may benefit both parties; in first place, the information provided by learners may guide the selection of content and learning activities. Secondly, when learners know in detail the information about goals, objectives, and learning activities, they may develop a greater appreciation and acceptance of the learning experience.
3. Selection of course content that matches the objectives.
4. Definition of philosophy of teaching. It means to think about which approach of teaching may be adequate for the course considering the selection of content and goals.

5. Selection of material taking into account the methodology, the audience and content.

Teachers should select as well the resources that learners are going to be provided with.

It includes the materials that the institution has available.

6. Arrangement of schedule that contains due dates for readings, assignments, tests, projects, etc.

7. Assessment of content. This needs to be explicit and state clearly the criteria of assessing, including the format, number, and percentages for quizzes and exams, as well as descriptions of papers and projects.

Those elements are the most required with the aim of creating a good syllabus; but it is feasible to include the details that might be necessary according to the conditions. The syllabus is seen as a public document and as it was already stated, it brings many advantages for teachers, especially because it serves to keep a record of what is done and what is going to be done in the course. However, the syllabus could be kept only by the teacher in certain circumstances for example when the teaching is taking place in high schools. But when working with undergraduate learners or adults who are supposed to be more independent and responsible, the syllabus may be helpful for them as well, since they are provided with a reference about the course. In such cases, according to Nunan (1988) it would be acceptable to comprise more aspects like course requirements, additional activities or even student responsibilities; the last one making reference to their participation and the penalization for not taking a test, missing classes, or not presenting an activity on time.

Additionally to the components that a syllabus should contain, Breen (2001) presented four principles of organization that define a syllabus. The first principle refers to what language knowledge and ability (reading, speaking, writing and listening) should the syllabus be focused upon. The second principle deals with the selection of appropriate content that keeps closely

related to the linguistic and communicative focus. The third principle concerns to the subdivision of content, it means that the content selected should be broken down in parts for ease teaching and learning. And the last principle refers to the sequence of content; in other words, the syllabus ought to adopt a step-by-step progression, that goes from less to more complex knowledge and works gradually the abilities, or the syllabus may be cyclic, where at the beginning the knowledge and skills are worked and refined at later points.

However, the designing of syllabi in Colombia has failed because there is a mismatch between the characteristics of the syllabus type and the needs to fulfill considering the fact that the government in Colombia promotes that all students from schools and universities have to learn English and accomplish levels of proficiency established by the Common European Framework of reference for languages, which has been incorporated in the teaching of languages in Colombia. Students are expected to be able to manage the language accurately and speak fluently; but those purposes could not be achieved successfully if a syllabus is still not understood and the implementation of syllabi keeps failing. To state a short definition of syllabus, it can be said that it is a public and flexible document that serves teachers as a guide that contains an ordered list of the content to be taught in a determined course within a time frame.

Additionally, it includes the objectives to achieve, the methodology, and materials required taking into consideration learners' needs and teaching and learning conditions. By saying flexible, it means that it could be modified if necessary as long as the teaching progresses, more content could be added or even counted out, and perhaps the skill focus may change at a determined point.

Syllabus Types

Syllabus design has evolved according to multiple language assumptions. When designing a syllabus, teachers are required to analyze the learning conditions in order to incorporate an appropriate type of syllabus. As language teaching approaches, models of syllabus have emerged due to opposite reactions from some proponents to others, and their disagreements about the conceptions they have regarding the basis for the organization of teaching.

Nunan (1988) made a distinction between *synthetic* and *analytical syllabus*. Hence, in the synthetic syllabi the content is selected and graded according to structural, lexical, notional, functional and most situational topical syllabi, in which the learning process is a gradual gathering of isolated parts that are taught. Nunan (1988) said that few syllabus designers nowadays adopt a synthetic syllabus since most of them now attempt to combine grammatical as well as functional and notional items. Wilkins (as cited in Finch, 2000) claimed that the synthetic syllabus is based upon the assumption that learners have the ability to learn a language in parts separately one from the other, and then synthesize or join together all the pieces when they are required to use them for communicative intends.

On the other hand, Wilkins (as cited in Finch, 2000) continued saying that the analytic syllabi are arranged in terms of purposes that lead people to learn a language, and the sort of language performances that are needed for accomplishing those purposes. Furthermore, the analytical syllabi divide the language in chunks considering learners' ability to infer or deduce language rules without linguistic interference. The procedural, process and task-based syllabi exemplified this analytical syllabus.

The formal syllabus. Finch (2000) said that the formal syllabus can also be classified as synthetic syllabus for its characteristics. It is based on Holliday's theory of linguistic learning and behaviorism theories. The content is characterized for being a selection of forms and structures

that goes from the easy to the difficult and are taught in isolation since this syllabus type does not have a communicative intent; in this sense, language skills are worked from the receptive to the productive ones, and learners' production is expected to be accurate; in this sense, learners are seen as passive participants

According to Breen (2001) the knowledge focus in a formal syllabus is on learning grammar forms, systems and rules of phonology, morphology, and vocabulary. Breen (2001) also said that in this syllabus type the sequence of content goes from simple to complex, or frequent to infrequent, or most useful to less useful. However, Finch (2000) presented a few advantages of this syllabus type. For instance, it is easy to evaluate and organize, and it increases learners' metalinguistic awareness. Certainly, it may be suitable for teaching adults learners since they tend to feel safe and confident when they look at organization.

Notional-functional syllabus. Type of syllabus resulted as a reaction against the formal syllabus. White (as cited in Raine, 2010) explained that the notional-functional syllabus is based on two important elements: a notional aspect and a functional aspect. The first one is concerned with concepts such as time, space, movement, cause and effect, while the latter describes and classifies the intentional use of language. According to Reilly (1988) for the notional-functional syllabus proposed by Wilkins in 1972 the productive skills are more valuable since the content is functional considering language to be used in real-life situations such as requests, descriptions, explanations, and so forth; in other words, language focus is on speech acts. There is an emphasis on promoting interaction and learners have a central role, but the content tends to be over divided and assessment component may be a clutter. Finch (2000) presented that the sequencing of the notional-functional syllabus goes from general sets of functions to more specific.

The procedural syllabus. Finch (2000) affirmed that the procedural syllabus has two main proponents Prabhu and Romany in 1960s. Although it focuses on the meaningfulness of the

language and interaction, the content is disorganized and sometimes unrealistic; especially because it does not include an assessment and evaluation component; it seems to be done arbitrarily. The procedural syllabus was proposed by Prabhu (1980) through Prabhu's *Bangalore Project* which was developed under the premise that structure can be best learned when attention is given to meaning. Finch (2000) explained that the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project (CPT) was applied in eight classrooms with eighteen teachers and three hundred and ninety children around the ages of eight to fifteen. It was carried out in periods of one to three years, starting from 1979 to 1984. Greenwood (as cited in Finch, 2000) claimed that the Bangalore project was not focused on the tasks themselves; it means, the language used in the process, but on the pedagogic focus of tasks. The focus shifts from the linguistic aspect to the pedagogical one focusing on learning or the learner. The tasks and activities are designed and planned in advance but not the linguistic content. In this syllabus tasks are graded conceptually and grouped by similarity. Within such a framework the selection, ordering and grading of content is not so much considerable for the syllabus designer. Arranging the course around tasks such as information- and opinion-gap activities helps the learner perceive the language subconsciously while consciously focusing on solving the meaning behind the tasks. Rabbini (2002) claimed that it is a process rather than a product. It means, focus is not on what the student will have accomplished on completion of the program, but on the specification of learning tasks and activities that s/he will embark during the course.

The process syllabus. Finch (2000) said that the process syllabus bases the selection of content upon learners' desires and can change many times which makes this syllabus model very flexible because learners are given the choice of selecting the content to learn; however, this may require proficiency on the part of teachers, in other words, it may be too demanding for teachers to adapt only to learners' desires and decisions. According to Rabbini (2002) the process syllabi,

or the analytical approach, was developed as a result of a sense of failure in product-oriented courses to that wanted to improve communicative language skills. Finch (2000) stated that this syllabus type was proposed by Breen in 1980s, and it is characterized for having a humanistic and holistic approach, which means that learners are treated as a whole. The most important strength of a process syllabus is its emphasis on negotiation of meaning and communication.

Task-Based Syllabus

Briefly it is possible to define the task-based syllabus proposed by Nunan in 1988 as the organization of content around needs making an extensive use of authentic materials. It is less demanding and less disorganized; but it requires an adequate tasks management on the part of teachers as well as setting a clear purpose for students when completing the task. According to Reilly (1988) in this type of syllabus, language learning is attached to task performance, as task-based teaching has the objective of teaching learners to employ a variety of language forms and resources that allow them to complete a work.

Nunan (2001) affirmed that task-based syllabi embody the realization of communicative language teaching. Instead of turning around lists of grammatical, functional-notional, and other items, the designer carries out a needs analysis which orients the organization of tasks that the learners will need to perform in real situations outside the classroom. Nunan (2001) presented a few examples of tasks like completing a credit card application, finding one's way from a hotel to a subway station or checking into a hotel.

Breen (2001) affirmed that the task-based syllabi subdivide the content selected in two categories. The first one is communicative/target like tasks which is subcategorized in everyday tasks like planning a trip, or special purpose tasks like solving a technical problem. And the second category is called metacommunicative/learning tasks which include activities like deducing pattern in verb forms or comparing learning strategies.

Nunan (2001) also claimed that any approach to language pedagogy needs to pay attention to three essential elements. Those are explained by Nunan from the perspective of task-based instruction. The first is language data that refers to the samples of spoken or written language to which learners are exposed, in other words, what is known as input. If learners have no contact with language data, it is quite possible that learning never happens. Plus, the language should be appropriately shown within a context that relates form, function and use. Nunan (2001) continued explaining that in language teaching there is a contrast between authentic and non-authentic data. Authentic data are all samples of spoken or written language that have not been exclusively written for the purposes of language teaching. On the contrary, non-authentic data include dialogues and reading passages that have been specially written.

In my opinion, authentic samples of language tend to be more meaningful than non-authentic samples of language that are usually found on books. Authentic input enables learners to realize that the target language is also used in real situations, and for that reason they should be oriented to perceive the foreign language as a means to communicate and express opinions. Learners must be exposed to language used in everyday situations for demonstrating that comparable to their mother tongue the target language can be used naturally.

The second essential element explained by Nunan (2001) is information. Learners need practical information about the target culture, as well as linguistic information about target language systems, and process information about how to address the learning. They can get this information either deductively through explicit explanation from the teacher or a book, or they can get it inductively when formulating the rule through the analysis of examples of language. Finally, the third element is practice which makes reference to the improvement of language abilities or the extensive practice. Nunan (2001) said that it is possible to design practice opportunities by making a distinction between tasks, exercises and activities. A task has been

already defined, but Nunan (2001) in few words explained it as a communicative performance that does not usually have a limited focus on a particular grammatical structure. It also has a non-linguistic outcome. An exercise, on the other hand, usually has a limiting focus on a single language element, and has a linguistic outcome. An activity also has a limiting focus on one or two language items, but also has a communicative outcome. In that sense, activities have something in common with tasks and something in common with exercises.

Willis (as cited in Finch, 2001) proposed five principles for the implementation of a task-based approach in the designing of a syllabus. The first principle refers to the exposure to worthwhile and authentic language. The second one says that there should be use of language. Besides, tasks should stimulate learners to engage in language use. Subsequently, at some points during the cycle task there should be a focus on language. Finally, the focus on language should be major at different times.

Components and Steps for Task-Based Syllabus Design

According to Nunan (1989) the components of a task-based syllabus include analysis of tasks, task selection and task grading. The analysis of tasks is based upon the goal of task-based instruction of developing learners' communicative competence. Nunan (1989) said that it is founded firstly on learners' goals; secondly input that includes tasks which enclose certain amount of verbal input, for example a dialogue passage; and non-verbal input found in a picture sequence. In third place, activities or tasks derived from the input; and this is followed by teacher and learners' roles as facilitator and communicators respectively; and setting or class organization, if learners work in pairs or groups. Task selecting is concerned with deciding what type of task and what content of tasks should be selected. Lastly, the task-based syllabus includes some criteria for judging good tasks, such as promote attention to relevant data, involve language use in the solving of the task, and promote sharing of information and expertise.

Nunan (2001) mentioned some steps for designing a language course according to task-based principles:

1. Teacher should select and sequence target tasks.
2. Teacher should create pedagogical tasks either rehearsal or activation tasks.
3. Teacher recognizes enabling skills. Enabling skills according to Nunan (2001) means the mastery of language systems (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) that permit learners to take part in communicative tasks and language exercises.
4. Integrate and sequence pedagogical tasks, communicative activities and language exercises. It is necessary to say that the syllabus designer classifies the knowledge and skills that the learner will need to carry out the tasks.

According to Rabbini (2002), following a task-based syllabus means that there is an agreement on the idea that speaking a language is a skill best perfected through practice and interaction, and it is indispensable to use tasks and activities which encourage learners to use the language communicatively in order to achieve a purpose. Tasks must be quite similar to the real world language needs of the student. That is to say, the fundamental learning theory of task-based and communicative language teaching recommend implementing activities in which language is in use to complete meaningful tasks that ultimately enhances learning.

Nunan (2004) stated that a task-based program must tie tasks together in units of work based on the principle of *task chaining*; it means that they are organized from topically or thematically through macrofunctions, microfunctions and grammatical elements they embrace. Tasks can share the same macrofunction, microfunction and grammatical elements. In other words, tasks that have a common intend in terms of social functions, functional use language, and grammatical forms required to perform the tasks. Certain functions and grammatical elements can appear in the program more than once even in diverse contexts. This syllabus type is consistent

with an organic view of language acquisition that maximizes learning opportunities. This notion has correspondence with a principle CLT which states that several language forms can be used to carry out a function, but a single form can perform a range of functions.

To conclude, it can be said that with a task-based syllabus learners are exposed to an extensive use of authentic materials and authentic input, and it gives learners the opportunity to analyze and explore communication. The content is organized in a cyclic way and learners can refine their knowledge and abilities. It combines familiar topics to less familiar ones and sometimes task sequence is shaped by the difficulties that learners encounter in earlier tasks.

Conclusions

Considering the review of literature about syllabus types, there are some relevant features that make possible to draw a number of conclusions about the relevance of a task-based syllabus and its advantages in an EFL setting like Colombia. A task-based syllabus is widely applicable and suitable for learners of all ages and backgrounds, especially for learners who have a well-defined purpose for learning. In our context, this purpose could be developing the ability to communicate, and this syllabus type concentrates on it directly through real tasks. It is organized around a needs analysis instead of a list of grammatical forms; the target tasks reproduce day-to-day actions and situations. In this sense, the outcomes are more communicative since learners use the target language as a vehicle to express meaning, give information and accomplish certain functions like filling a credit card application, checking in a hotel, and so forth; whereas they interact with the language.

In Colombia, educational conditions for foreign language teaching are not favorable; but a task-based syllabus may be practical to cope with the adversities. For instance, teachers can counter the inconvenience of having large classes by means of encouraging group work through jig-saw activities about a particular topic. In the syllabus, the teacher can establish the tasks that

are going to be worked in groups or pairs. Thus, learners are exposed to purposeful tasks such as planning a trip or applying for a job while they make use of a variety of resources, different language forms, functions, and skills. Besides, in high schools, students may be kept busy and engaged in developing an activity. In this way, possible discipline problems can be avoided, contributing with class management especially for new teachers.

Additionally, the number of hours devoted to English classes is an issue that some teachers encounter. But they can sort out this and make a better use of time by organizing tasks that have a clear purpose and an achievable outcome. For example, learners start developing the pre-task in the classroom, then, as time is too reduced in the school to complete the tasks, students can continue as independent work of homework. It could be prepare a written or oral report of the work developed in class, or a language exercise to practice the linguistic forms the tasks emphasized. It is convenient when working in class, make sure that learners have understood the purpose of the task or they are doing the right task, so students do not waste time in restarting again the task. It is also practical to state in advance the time limit to accomplish the tasks, and remind them occasionally how much time they have left.

Furthermore, high school students must face achievement tests like “Pruebas Saber”. English teachers frequently believe that to succeed in this test, students should learn the grammatical structures and lexical knowledge that the test assesses. However, it does not mean that teaching must be merely organized around isolated forms. Instead, teachers should provide authentic input and encourage a meaningful use of language, and when completing a task, learners are able to analyze the language and use it through interaction and communication. In this sense, learning grammar forms could be facilitated through contextualized activities. A task-based syllabus offers the opportunity to integrate communicative tasks and language exercises that embrace the knowledge or skills to learnt and practice (enabling skills).

Unfortunately, in our setting, decontextualized textbooks or materials are still employed, but task-based activities include real-life contents that enhance the meaningfulness of language. The materials employed should be above all authentic and have specific tasks to accomplish. Teachers can provide various pieces of materials, for example: movies, songs, TV commercials, news broadcasts, media, etc. These are considered authentic materials because they simulate or totally represent the outside world. This may result useful when learners need to learn cognitive, cultural and life skills along with the language. When organizing a task-based syllabus and choosing materials to carry out a course, resources beyond the textbooks are required; it means, materials that provide authentic data of the language that facilitate interaction and meaningful learning.

It is necessary to point out that although the task-based syllabus presents many advantages, it should not be consider as the best. In our setting, problems may arise, for example with selection of tasks and their management. Teachers should know how to manage tasks in terms of time devoted to their development, usefulness, and clear purpose. It is quite essential to consider that a task itself does not necessarily guarantee learning improvements unless the teacher or facilitator understands how tasks actually work in the classroom because designing a task-based syllabus is not only a matter of organizing content around tasks, and then assess learners according to their performance. More importantly, teachers are required to have sufficient knowledge about the instructional framework related to task-based planning, and assessment. As a final point, task-based syllabus makes the teaching job demanding and challenging for not proficiency teachers which is a problem in the EFL condition.

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