A Topic-Based Syllabus Design for a Conversation Course

Afshin Soori
Islamic Azad University, Larestan, Iran

Marzie Ghaderi
Islamic Azad University, Larestan, Iran

===

Abstract

Communication is an important skill, but how do we, as teachers, teach this to our students? This question will present many challenges to the course designer. We all know that language is the means of communication among human beings and it is necessary for second language learners to take control of communication. So, designing the courses for communication will be placed in a special place. Among the communication ways, conversation with oral language is an easy way. Making a conversation is an ability that appeared from breaking the speaking ability into its sub-skills. Communicative competence of learners includes this ability. Course designer and textbook writers have to focus on different dimensions of this skill and pay attention to the conditions of their learners in different societies. Formats of the syllabus have many types in relation to the given guidelines, tasks types, or other features. One of them is Topic-based syllabus. We focus on it and its relation to the communication skills and their common issues. Topic-based instruction model means that using four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in an integrated manner and use these in an inter-related manner to improve all the skills. So, in this paper, we will be talk about the approaches and the views of investigators about the topic-based instruction model.

Key Words: Topic-Based syllabus, Conversation course, Course designer, Syllabus design, Communication skill

1. Introduction

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 538

Finding the effective ways to develop the students' oral and non-oral communication skills is one of the biggest challenges in teaching language methodologies. As an answer to this challenge, a new type of language lesson, the *conversation class,* is suggested. This focuses on improving the conversation skill of students. Knowing a language involves many different things, but when people say, "I know French," primarily they mean they can *speak* French. The primary goal of "second language ability" is speaking because, when a second language learner is able to speak a language he/she may be able to read and may be even able to write, but it will not happen vice versa. In fact, we cannot imagine the average learner saying, "I want to learn to read Russian" or "I really want to learn to write Turkish." Almost all of our ESL/ EFL students dream of the day when they can finally say, "I *speak* English well."

For maintaining conversation in an appropriate form, learners should obey conversation rules. If they do not do that, then, their learning will face problems. Even learners who have a good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar may still struggle to communicate effectively without having specific conversation skills. Conversation strategies, structure, and micro-skills need to be explicitly taught. Unfortunately, many conversation courses and textbooks do not directly cover much of these materials.

Again, unfortunately, the research on teaching conversation is limited. This lack of research is due partially to the fact that teaching authentic conversation as part of a language education program has been a relatively recent development. Communicative activities are still the base of conversation classes (Barraja-Rohan, 2000).

Conversation classes are not systematic because the methodology has not provided information about which conversational skills or language input should be used. Several studies have attempted to put forward strategies to develop authentic conversation and others have created models for teaching specific aspects of conversation.

Making a conversation is an ability which breaks the speaking ability into its sub-skills. Communicative competence of learners includes this ability. (Faerch and Kasper, 1983).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 539

Now we want to define conversation to get more familiar with its nature. What is conversation, then? Goffman (1976) offered the following definition:

> Conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks, a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule ... and no final agreement or synthesis is demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as un-prejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants, (p. 264).

Now, conversation known as a formal activity is highly organized. Speakers who have mastery of conversation are identified as good speakers. It is viewed as a distinct skill that has its own importance apart from other skills or language knowledge. Conversation skill or activity has a few links with other skills such as grammar and vocabulary and has its role and place in language knowledge and mastery of other skills. However, familiarity with grammar and knowing a vast breadth of vocabulary do not guarantee the learners' conversation proficiency. They may need practice in the specialized skills that determine conversational fluency. So with attention to the above notes, the course-designer's role is vital and significant in designing the conversation syllabus.

Let us discuss the syllabus design features and then talk about the topic-based syllabus design and its specifications.

On investigating the syllabus design, we have to note some points. We need to deal with the different parts of language program design such as pedagogical and methodological choices, evaluation and assessment. We need to also consider how we involve the participants in syllabus design process. Theories about language teaching and language learning have largely determined the different approaches to syllabus design. Based on Nunan (1989), a syllabus designer should pay attention simultaneously to different aspects of syllabus design that are inter-connected with

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 540

each other such as content, methodology and evaluation. In addition, some researchers divided the design into different types and aspects. For example, Wilkins (1976) divided syllabi into Type A and Type B:

Based on this categorization, when designers want to design a syllabus, they have to attend to some points presented in the above chart. Therefore, a designer should pay attention to the differences of points of views and different aspects such as course design, methodology, language learning, and evaluation of the course.

Based on the above points this paper discusses one of the approaches, namely a type of syllabus called topic-based syllabus.

Topic-based Instruction in the EFL Classroom

The main characteristic of topic-based instruction (also referred to as theme-based instruction) in an EFL setting is that the teaching, learning materials and classroom activities are organised around a particular topic or theme. Its main goal is for students to acquire second language competence by working on certain topic areas.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 541

Based on Hudelson (1991), we may identify four principles, which are connected to language learning and are embedded in the topic-based approach:

1) In different stages of cognitive development, young learners are in the 'concrete operations'. This means that learning through experience has more benefit for children. The important point is that children need to be active rather than passive in language classes. This means that they need to be engaged in activities of which language is a part. The meaningful tasks and using language to accomplish these tasks offer the main goal for children.

2) The level of knowing or learning in a group is different, because someone in the group may know the language more than others. So learning could happen through a relation among those groups, the ones who know less learn from those who know more. So the interaction process among the learners is a vital point, and the interaction among the teacher and learners is very important. This provides a challenge for them in order to improve their levels. This kind of contextual support is known as scaffolding.

3) Figuring out how languages work is one of the duties of the learner. Therefore, acquisition is a discovery process. Learners have to figure out how the language works. 'In terms of the classroom context, an implication is that learners need opportunities to use and to experiment the new languages' (Hudelson). Errors happening during the learning process among the children are quite common. When they commit errors, and when they recognize their errors, they can improve and restructure their language system.

4) Social interaction results in the acquisition of the different elements of the language. In addition, exchanges of messages and talks among the learners could make "meaning". So in order to convey the meaning they should talk with each other.

Topic based syllabus design is a straightforward process and among the process, topic selection is a notable unit, which extends over one or two weeks. It is the topic that 'selects' the new language items, language functions and vocabulary. The topic also suggests relevant listening and speaking tasks, interactive activities (for example, games, information-gap, etc.), reading texts, and a variety of writing tasks keyed to the topic. The aim of using topic-based instructional syllabus is not to give all information about that topic to learners but it is a way by

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 542

which learners would explore information about the topic and its relation with languages. This will be a proper way to create familiarity between learners and specific topics with language learning tools. Activity type and the number and kinds of activities planned around a topic depend on various points and limits such as time, resources, size, level and many other characteristics of learners or classes. But while paying attention to these factors, another important factor we need to consider is teacher's willingness to involve learners in motivating learning experiences.

When an instructor organizes some vital tools such as teaching, learning materials and classroom activities around a specific topic or theme, it means that he/she is using topic-based instruction mode for his/her EFL setting. Its main goal is for students to acquire second language competence by working on certain topic areas. With topic-based teaching, emphasis is put on the lesson content, which can serve the various interests of students, while remaining focused on language objectives. The method is practical and promotes effective language learning (Brown, 2001).

About the effectiveness of topic-based instruction, Ausubel (1963) argued that meaningful learning occurs when new information can be related to learners' prior knowledge and existing cognitive structures. Topic selection for class work should be based on personal interests of learners and their willingness. So, teachers should pay attention to the learners' right in choosing topics for their class or homework and give them a choice to choose a topic (Novak 1989).

Finally, topic-based instruction allows for the integration of skills, which is, as stated above, one of the key principles of the Whole Language Approach. Teachers who use topic-based instruction in their classrooms avoid teaching the skills as separate units, but seek to integrate them, since it is the theme itself that controls the selection and sequencing of language focus. It can be stated that topic-based instruction is an appropriate method to apply the Whole Language Approach to the EFL classroom, and that it has strong potential for resulting in effective language learning.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 543

In order to understand the ideology which supports the implementation of topic-based instruction as a method in the EFL classroom, it is appropriate to discuss the approach from which the method is derived, i.e. the Whole Language Approach. To avoid confusion, it must be stated that Whole Language Approach is not a method in itself or an activity within a lesson. What started as an approach to teaching reading, Whole Language Approach was used to describe the way in which language is seen as a whole in contrast to breaking it up into linguistic bits and pieces (Brown, 2001).

The Whole Language Approach is completely opposed to the decoding approach to language teaching, which focuses mainly on fragmenting the language into smaller units such as phonics, grammar points and vocabulary (Ping, n.d.). Bottom-up processing of language supported the decoding approach to language, where learners build up understanding of the language based on their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and sounds, whereas Whole Language Approach requires learners to construct meaning holistically, founded on their general background knowledge and life experiences (Nunan, 2003). The integration of the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) would be the key principles of Whole Language Approach.

Teaching techniques that involve integration are supported by the fact that reinforcement of one skill by another often occurs. But how can English teachers put the Whole Language approach into practice? Richards and Rodgers point out that: *"Each language teacher is free to implement the approach according to the needs of particular classes"* (2001:112). One of the ways to apply the approach to the ESL classroom is through topic-based instruction.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, we compared the theories and beliefs about the conversation courses and topic-based syllabus designs and their relation with each other. The first point was about the importance of speaking in learning language and in language knowledge zone. Rohan (2000) pointed out that making learners to talk is one of the basic points in communicative classes. We have also argued that speaking (talking) has the vital role in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 544

language and language learning. Therefore, in language learning whoever is the successful usually has a good speaking skill.

We also talked about the syllabus designs and their forms or structures, their components and their designs or methods. The Wilkins (1976) theory and table showed the basic form and the vital aspect of syllabus design such as content, methodology, and evaluation, which are related to each other. A designer should pay attention to them simultaneously during syllabus design. Then we attempted to identify the relationship between topic-based instruction and communication courses or communicative competence.

===

References

Barraja-Rohan, A. (2000). Teaching conversation and socio-cultural norms with conversation analysis. In A. J. Liddlicoat and C. Crozet (Eds.), *Teaching languages, teaching cultures* (65-77). Australia: Language Australia.

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching (Fourth Edition).* Essex: Longman.

Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (1983). Plans and strategies in foreign language communication. In C. Faerch & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Strategies in interlanguage communication* (pp. 20-60). London: Longman.

Goffman, E. (1976). Replies and responses. *Language in Society, 5,* 257-313.

Hudelson, S. 1991. 'EFL teaching and children: a topic-based approach'. English Teaching Forum October 1991.

Novak, J. D. (1989*).* Empowering Learners and Educators. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 4 (1) , 1989 - 9572.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilkins, D. (1976). *Notional syllabuses.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilkins, D. (1976). *Notional syllabuses.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL.* New York: Newbury House.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 545

===

Afshin Soori
Department of Language and Literature , Larestan Branch
Islamic Azad University, Larestan
Iran
afshin_soori@yahoo.com

Marzie Ghaderi
Department of Language and Literature , Larestan Branch
Islamic Azad University, Larestan
Iran

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015**
A Topic-Based Syllabus design for a Conversation Course
Afshin Soori and Marzie Ghaderi 546