The Notion of Content Grading and Sequencing in English Language Syllabi: A Critical Study

Dr. Hamdan Mohammed E. Al-Ghamdi
English Language Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah Al-Mukarramah

Abstract

The current study discusses the question of content sequencing in English language syllabuses following a chronological order. This investigation shows that content grading and sequencing on basis of 'difficulty' is agreed upon as inevitable. However, it demonstrates that all claimed problems are paradigmatic but not procedural in origin. The argument is based on the question: the 'difficulty' of what? The notion of 'difficulty' has recently been taken to refer to the complexity of the language learning process per se in the learners' eyes in "naturalistic" acquisition approaches rather than to the language item difficulty as assessed by the language teacher in "traditional" and "communicative" teaching approaches. Although some general evaluation criteria were suggested, the complexity levels of the cognitive process of learning could never be recognized and assessed on practical and measurable bases. This critical drawback of the adoption of 'tasks' as the only unit for content organization in pure "process and procedural" syllabuses sparks arguments for a return to a more balanced view which recommends an integration of two or more syllabus types with evenly different philosophical underpinnings in order to meet the demand of optimal content gradation. This provisional solution may well prove challenging as language teachers and syllabus designers are not expected to make it easily into apparently opposing theories.

Keywords: English for specific purposes**,** integrated syllabuses**,** language notions and functions**,** learning tasks**,** process syllabuses, traditional syllabuses.

1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it is imperative to start by coming to terms with what 'syllabus' and its 'gradation' refer to. In this paper, the British sense of 'syllabus' is used which "refers to the content or subject matter of an individual subject" (White, 1988:4). According to Candlin (1984:31), a syllabus is a collection "of items of content, derived from a special view of the subject-matter in question, broken down and sequenced in order to facilitate, it is claimed, and optimize, it is implied, their learning by learners in classrooms." Thus, designing a language syllabus should include "examining needs analyses and establishing goals. It then entails the selection, grading and sequencing of the language and other content, and the division of the content into units of manageable material" (Jordan, 1997:56). As for 'syllabus gradation', the assumption here is that 'gradation' and 'sequencing' have the same meaning (Breen, 1984). They both refer to the ordering and staging of the selected language input according to its complexity[1]. That is, the English language syllabus moves from the easier to the more difficult, from the more general to the more specific, from the more frequent to the less frequent, or from the familiar to the unfamiliar to the language learner.

[1] Throughout this paper, 'difficulty' and 'complexity' are used interchangeably.

Theoretical Rationales for the Notion of Gradation

Now, can language items be taught all at once without grouping and sequencing? Or, can we set a language syllabus in which these items are not taught in a particular order? The immediate answer is that such a mission seems impossible to accomplish. Consider, for instance, teaching beginners the different tenses of English before teaching them the regular and irregular verbs, or for the learners to learn English negation before learning word order and auxiliaries.

A language is a system, and the process of its learning and teaching is systematic in nature (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). This 'systematicity' necessitates that language items and activities cannot be taught all at once. Therefore, there is almost a general consensus among linguists and language syllabus designers on the important consideration of some form of content grading, sequencing, coherence, and continuity as a 'universal requirement' in language instruction. Mackey (1965:204), for instance, asserts that "we cannot start anywhere or with anything; for in a system one thing fits into another, one things goes with another, and one thing depends on another." Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:40) point out that "since it is apparently impossible to teach the whole of language and culture in any one unit, year, or level, curriculum planners have come to the conclusion that, particularly in regular courses, selection and gradation of language items or notions within the communicative functions is imperative". Nunan (1988:47) warns that "any proposal failing to offer criteria for grading and sequencing can hardly claim to be a syllabus at all." Long and Crookes (1992:31) justifiably claim that "learners rarely, if ever, move from zero to target like mastery of new items in one step. Both naturalistic and classroom learners pass through fixed developmental sequences in word order, negation, questions, relative clauses, and so on". Skehan (1996:51) agrees that it is necessary for language learning activities to be "sequenceable on some principled criterion". In a similar vein, Robinson (2001:33) believes that "the rationale for developing target task ability for L2 learners by gradually increasing the complexity of the tasks used to prepare them for this is similar to that adopted in other fields, such as mathematics education or pilot training, where simpler problems and flight simulations are practised prior to more complex versions." He justifies that the "sequencing decision should effectively facilitate L2 development: the acquisition of new L2 knowledge, and restructuring of existing L2 representations" (p. 34). (See also Yalden, 1984; Allen, 1984; White, 1988; Brown, 1995; Johnson, 1996; Willis and Willis, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Swan, 2005; and Robinson, 2011).

In a traditional structural syllabus, the issue of gradation and sequence on the basis of the grammatical difficulty and simplicity of the language input was a must. However, most teachers and course-books writers, if not all, would agree that the outcome of a grammar syllabus can be linguistic rather than communicative competence.

In 1970s, a new type of English language syllabi was introduced. The traditional view of teaching a language through its sequenced

grammatical items was substituted by a new view in which the language was approached through its 'notions' (e.g., time and space) and 'functions' (e.g., suggesting and refusing) which were considered the basic unit of analysis in the language syllabus. This approach received criticism because of its lack of grading parameters for language notions and functions. A language syllabus designer cannot justifiably claim that 'suggesting', as a language function, is more difficult for a learner to learn than, let's say, 'refusing'.

This fact led to the development of the so-called Process, Procedural, and Task-Based approaches[2] to language syllabus design in the 1980s and 1990s. This time the focus was on the process (*how*) of learning rather than the product (*what*), and language learning 'tasks' and classroom 'activities' were considered the building blocks of the communicative language syllabus. Proponents of this approach admit to the importance of the sequential arrangement of language learning tasks and activities (Skehan, 1996 and Robinson, 2001). Nevertheless, the criticism persisted to be the non-existence of adequate content (tasks) grading bases. Although some parameters for the organizations of tasks were suggested by different syllabus designers and textbook writers, yet they were not sufficient and complicated the matter. According to Nunan (1988:107), "grading becomes a major problem in syllabuses based on tasks and activities rather than lists of grammatical items."

This paper proposes to discuss the importance of sequencing and grading in English language syllabi and shows how the different approaches to syllabus design and methodology[3] considers and deals with this principle notion. It is an attempt to throw light on the inevitable well-recognized complexities surrounding the issue, and draw the attention to the need for more research.

Synthetic (Process) vs. Analytic (Product) Approaches

This 'synthetic-analytic' dichotomy in the organization and methodology of English language syllabus was introduced by Wilkins (1976). The synthetic approaches assume that the language learning process is 'additive' and 'linear'. It is a process of gradual accumulation of parts that are taught separately and one at a time in order to build up the whole structure of language (Jordan, 1997). In other words, the different parts of language are taught in discrete steps. In the analytic syllabus, on the other hand, the learner is exposed to the whole of the language in natural 'chunks' or 'samples' that suit learners' needs. These language chunks are organized according to the purposes of the language learning process and the required target language performance (Wilkins, 1976:13).

From the syllabus grading point of view, the synthetic syllabus consists of lists of discrete categories or items, be they on language vocabulary, grammar, functions, notions, or situations (Widdowson, 1984; Nunan, 1988; and Long and Crookes, 1992). Thus, lexical, structural, and

[2] The terms of 'Process' and 'Task-Based Syllabuses' were used first by Breen (1984 and 1987), whereas the term of 'Procedural Syllabuses' was introduced first by Prabhu (1987).

[3] Syllabus methodology refers to "the means by which the syllabus is implemented" (Ellis, 2009:232).

notional/functional syllabuses are all 'itemized' and synthetic in principle (Bourke, 2006). Surprisingly, Wilkins (1976) claims that his notional approach is analytic. He argues that learners are invited to use directly or indirectly their 'analytic capacities' in the first place to tackle the 'chunks' to which they are exposed to in order to figure out the language items to be learnt. However, Wilkins's argument is rejected knowing that notions and functions are still *linguistic* units of analysis (Long and Crookes, 1992). "Using preselected linguistic units and linguistic criteria to select, grade, and sequence pedagogical content leads us back to synthetic syllabus design solutions" (Markee, 1997:17).

It is presumably more acceptable to make the distinction between product syllabuses (structural, lexical, notional/functional, situational) as synthetic, on the one hand, and process syllabuses (process, procedural, task-based) as analytic, on the other. In product-oriented syllabuses, the focus is on the outcome or the *what* of instruction). However, process-oriented syllabuses focus on the methodology or the *how* of learning (White, 1988).

As for the content-oriented language syllabus types such as today's English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes including English for Academic Purposes (EAP), they can be oriented somewhere half-way or rather nearer to the process end on a 'product-process continuum' (McDonough J., 1986; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Robinson P. C., 1991; and Brown, 1995). They include skills-based and theme or topic-based syllabuses (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001). Although this approach is essentially analytic and start with learners' needs analysis, it usually gives some attention to the language gains of the learning process (Nunan, 1988 and Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). It makes use of the 'specialist content' and subject matter topics, presented for instance in a skills-based form, as the 'instructional scaffolding' (a carrier vehicle) to help learners learn about both the topic in question in addition to the specific language associated with it (Robinson P. C. 1991 and Bourke, 2006).

What concerns us here is the generalization that in synthetic syllabuses we do have predefined criteria for sequencing the content according to levels of difficulty, frequency, and familiarity. When it comes to the innovative process task-based syllabuses which are still considered to an extent the state of the art in language syllabus design (Markee, 1997), they are criticized for the lack of identified criteria (not necessarily grammatical ones) for content selecting and grading.

Structural Syllabuses:

The traditional structural (a.k.a. linguistic) syllabuses represent the clearest manifestation of syllabus gradation on basis of intuitive simplicity and difficulty of the linguistic aspects. These aspects refer to language forms including the related language components of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse, etc. (Littlewood, 2004). According to this approach, learning a foreign language was viewed as mastering its vocabulary and grammatical patterns. Robinson P. C. (1991:36) explains that the structural syllabus

consists of "an ordered set of language items, typically graded by supposed difficulty of learning. This syllabus has had the longest history in ELT."

Simplicity and difficulty of language structures are defined in 'grammatical terms' (Nunan, 1988). And impressionistic evaluations of the levels of difficulty are normally informed by considerable experiential knowledge in language teaching and learning. Thus, by way of example, a structural language syllabus could have its content sequenced as follows: parts of speech including nouns, pronouns, adjectives, definite and indefinite articles, demonstratives, quantifiers, verbs, adverbs, etc; tense forms; phrases; simple sentences; interrogation and negation; relativization; passivization; etc (see a typical sequence of grammatical items for a very beginner in *Real Times Elementary* (Axbey, 1997)). Therefore, language structural patterns are ordered in textbooks in a linear shape leading the learner to acquire them in an accumulative manner**.**

Language words, however, are graded according to their frequency of use in authentic spoken and written language. The corpus-based lexical syllabus is a product of this approach to vocabulary frequency of use counts. It makes use of relevant words counts and lexical frequency in designing purposeful teaching material. It links vocabulary learning to authentic communicative situations and language use (Willis, 1990). It is based on the huge corpus of English words database known as COBUILD (Collins-Birmingham University International Language Database). Normally, this syllabus type is only applied within a 'mixed syllabus' (McDonough and Shaw, 1993).

This linguistic approach to language syllabus design has been criticized, in part, for its complete failure to realize other factors besides mere linguistic criteria, such as psycholinguistic and cognitive factors, that might well contribute to the difficulty of the structural items (Yalden, 1984; Nunan, 1989; Ellis, 2003; and Ellis, 2006). White (1988:53) notes that "judging ease and difficulty is no simple matter since this is a question of learning rather than linguistics." That is to say, a language item can be simple and direct; however, it may well in practice be difficult to learn (learning difficulty) due to other probable factors such as L1 interference and/or the stage of development and its relationship to the learning process per se. A good example is the third person 's' morpheme. Linguistically speaking, it is expected to be easy for the students to learn the rule that 'if the statement is in the present simple tense and the subject is third person singular noun or pronoun, add (s/es) to the end of the verb'. Although this is a straightforward rule (explicit knowledge)[4], many learners of EFL find great difficulty for sometime before mastering it (implicit knowledge).

Researchers in second language acquisition and learning, try to justify and claim that second language learners, like children, have their own 'inbuilt syllabus' and they learn the language form input according to a predetermined subconscious natural sequence or order through 'the

[4] For detailed accounts of the 'implicit' and 'explicit L2 knowledge' see (Fotos and Ellis, 1991) and (Ellis, 2006).

operation of some internal system of abstract rules and principles' (Prabhu, 1987:70) (See also Baily *et al.*, 1974; Krashen, 1982; and Bourke, 2006). This learner's syllabus refers to some psycholinguistic abilities or skills employed 'unconsciously' by learners when they are exposed to the language input throughout their interlanguage developmental stages (Brumfit, 1984 and Steenkamp and Visser, 2011). Clearly, there is an obvious conflict between the linguistic and psychological factors that affect the level of language learning difficulty. The 'disenchantment' with the structural syllabus is due then to its failure to consider the effects of these 'psycholinguistic' criteria (White, 1988).

Needless to say that structural syllabuses have also been criticized not only because of their strict adherence to syllabus gradation on linguistic basis, but also because of its complete disregard for communication skills. Despite all criticism, grammar persists to appear as a discrete constituent in language courses due to the paramount importance of explicit teaching of grammar as shown by Generative Grammar. The basic structure of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) course persists to consider the grammatical content in their organization. Richards (2001:153) reports, "In many parts of the world, teachers and students expect to see a grammar strand in a course and react negatively to its absence." Swan (2005:394) concludes that "future research is unlikely, for example, to stop us teaching present tenses before subjunctives".

Notional/Functional Syllabuses

Shifting the focus away from form and closer to meaning resulted in the development of the communicative approaches to syllabus design, namely the situational, and soon afterwards the notional/functional syllabuses (a.k.a. semantic syllabuses, communicative syllabuses, and notional syllabuses) (Brown, 1995 and Johnson, 1998). This type is comprised of the two elements of meanings (notions or concepts) and communicative acts (functions or uses). The language is classified into notions (such as space, time, existence, numbers, family relationships, emotions, colours, etc.) and communicative functions[5] (such as describing people or places, asking for or giving directions, suggesting, persuading, refusing, agreeing, apologizing, inviting, offering, advising, etc.). It is particularly assumed that sorting language into what learners want to do with it and what meanings and concepts they want to express should be much appropriate and helpful to language learners than merely adopting the traditional approach to classification into discrete grammatical forms (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983).

Like all other language curriculum writers, proponents of this approach take for granted that the existence of gradation and sequencing in any syllabus is essential and necessary (see Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Wilkins (1976), for example, explains that the adoption of his notional approach does not necessarily mean the abandonment of the linguistic criteria used before for the

[5] Earlier known as 'concrete situations' of daily settings such as in a restaurant, in a taxi, shopping, going through customs at the airport, or booking into the hotel (Roberts, 1998).

purposes of content gradation. Instead, these 'well-established' criteria could be 'incorporated' into a 'cyclic' notional model of content grading and sequencing. He goes on to clarify that the notional/functional syllabus is supposed to have a cyclical rather than a linear grading of its content, "in a notional syllabus the ordering is a matter of the relationship between the different cycles, there being possibly less attention paid to ordering within each phase of the cycle" (p.59). For a typical example of a notional/functional syllabus, see *Threshold 1990* (Van Ek and Trim, 1998).

Although many proposers of the notional/functional approach have suggested different categories of functions, no one of them has been able to justify the order in which they are presented. Wilkins (1976) suggests six communicative functions, namely Judgment and Evaluation, Persuasion, Argument, Rational Enquiring and Exposition, Personal Emotions, and Emotional Relations. Still, the legitimate question is whether one or more of these groups of functions should have priority over the others? And on what basis? Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) suggest five main categories (with subheadings) of communicative functions in the following order: Personal, Interpersonal, Directive, Referential, and Imaginative. In fact, they do not give reasons for putting these categories of functions in this particular order. The question remains whether it makes any difference if the 'directive' function comes before the 'personal' one. In words of one syllable, no clear and adequate criteria for grading language notions and functions could be provided.

The traditional 'simplicity and complexity' criterion would not be of help in grading notional/functional syllabuses. Nunan (1988:37) debates, "the grading of functional items becomes much more complex because there are few apparent objective means for deciding that, for instance, 'apologizing' is either simpler or more difficult than another item such as 'requesting'." Most proponents of this approach have only considered the notion of grading and sequencing when they talk about the grammatical items rather than the functions and notions of the language. What we make of this fact is that the functions are supposed to be graded according to the complexity of the grammatical structures they elicit. This indicates a need to use an integrated structural/functional syllabus to overcome this problem of gradation (Swan, 1985).

However, it is argued that notional-functional syllabuses even in integration with structural syllabuses would eventually result in 'itemized' syllabi which viewed communication as a product rather than a process (Long and Crookes, 1992; and Bourke, 2006). Further, this type of English language syllabi has been criticized for its failure to fully achieve the objective of teaching the language communicatively and fulfill its learner's communicative needs. According to Nunan (1988:41), "it was the realization that specifying functions and notions would not in itself lead to the development of communicative language skills, which prompted the development of process-oriented views."

Thus, the field has witnessed later an innovative movement from the 'unnatural' traditional grammatical (linguistic),

functional and notional syllabuses to the process-based (task-oriented) approaches (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). The new direction for syllabus design has as its initial orientation the investigation of both psycholinguistic and educational demands of *the language learning process* (Breen, 2001). The assumption this time has been that the Task-Based Instructional (TBI) syllabus is more capable of creating appropriate target language real situations and goals than traditional syllabuses (Ellis, 2009 and Robinson, 2001). So, the weak 'communicative activities' term is being substituted with the strong 'language learning tasks' term with the aim of 'providing greater exposure' to new authentic contexts for a systematic learning of L2 (Skehan, 2003). Therefore, the strong form of the TBI approach is expected to be much more effective than the previous approaches in the achievement of "spontaneous fluent error-free production in learners" (Swan, 2005:387).

Process Syllabuses (Task-Based Approach)

This is a learning-centred approach. It is an instructional environment in which the learning process including learners' styles and preferences are considered, the syllabus is negotiated between teachers and learners right from the beginning, the objective is to motivate autonomous and lifelong learning in learners, and the teacher's role is to manage and facilitate learning through prioritizing group work rather than to transmit information (Gray, 1990; Robinson P. C., 1991; Breen, 2001; Littlewood, 2004; Swan, 2005; and Bourke, 2006).

The syllabus consists of some pre-suggested and negotiated 'activities' and problem-solving 'tasks' through which the students are supposed to learn the target language (Swan, 2005). A good definition of a communicative language learning task is provided by Nunan (1989:10), "a piece of 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." Tasks[6] (like renting an apartment, drawing a map while listening to the instructions or reading a map and give instructions, taking notes in a lecture, filling in a job application, buying a book, being interviewed, writing a curriculum vitae, planning a trip, calculating distances of trips, completing a story, solving a mathematical problem, etc.) constitute the key organizational unit of the English communicative curriculum.

This state-of-the-art approach has its origins in research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). As a result, there are no preset syllabus objectives except the general goal of 'natural' or 'realistic' communication (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Yousefi *et al*., 2012). This instructional purpose can be achieved through creating real settings or situations (e.g., a visit to the physician) of learning under relevant topics or themes (health and illness or symptoms of diseases), engaging students in them, and leading students eventually to implicit learning (Ellis, 2003 and Crabbe, 2007).

[6] In the relevant literature there are mainly two types of tasks: communicative, real-world, target-like tasks and metacommunicative (focus on language form), pedagogic (classroom), learning tasks (See Nunan, 1989; Breen, 2001; and Willis and Willis, 2001).

Proponents of task-based approach object to task grading on basis of linguistic difficulty as we, they claim, will end up with a structural rather than a task-based syllabus. In other words, we are using tasks to implement a structural syllabus (Robinson, 2001). The underpinnings of this approach to the notion of task gradation are rather premised on the "widely accepted idea that research into complexity of second language tasks is necessary to pedagogical decisions regarding the grading and sequencing of tasks for the purposes of syllabus design" (Yousefi *et al*., 2012:1438). In other words, research on 'task complexity' is a normal product of the urgent need to establish standardized criteria for tasks grading in task-based syllabuses on basis of easiness and difficulty (Robinson and Gilabert, 2007). This approach contends that pedagogic tasks *must* be designed and sequentially arranged according to their *cognitive complexity*, and that "these design and sequencing decisions should be the basis of the task-based syllabus" (Robinson, 2007:193). The ultimate goal is to present learning tasks to language learners at their appropriate interlanguage developmental stage (Steenkamp and Visser, 2011).

This approach manifested itself in Prabhu's 'Procedural' language teaching syllabus in the 'Bangalore Project' between 1979 and 1984 in some South Indian high schools (Prabhu, 1987). In this project, Prabhu drew much of his 'communicational' ideas from research into L1 acquisition (e. g., the teacher should avoid 'structural' exercises and 'systematic' correction of students' grammatical mistakes, form is best learnt when the learner focuses on meaning, etc.). Prabhu (1987:24) defined a task as an intellectually challenging 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". In his project, he introduced teaching materials with three major types of problem-solving tasks; information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap activities. The only task grading criterion offered was that half the class should get at least half the task right, otherwise; the task is considered 'too difficult'. Clearly, this grading criterion is arbitrary and insufficient. According to Long and Crookes (1992:37), "use of a 'at least half the task' by 'at least half the class' (or any such ad hoc) criterion for assessing difficulty is not a satisfactory solution, for it makes task achievement a norm-referenced issue, reveals nothing about what made one task 'easier' than another, and thereby precludes any generalizations to new materials."

The cognitive rationale provided by Prabhu for implementing the task-based language instruction approach is noticeably in accordance with Krashen's (1982) firm belief in the importance of comprehensible input for learning. Prabhu (1987:72) claims that "the internal system developed by successful learners is far more complex than any grammar yet constructed by a linguist, and it is, therefore, unreasonable to suppose that any language learner can acquire a deployable internal system by consciously understanding and assimilating the rules in a linguist's grammar." Therefore, Prabhu's perception of the notion of grading and sequencing derives from the ideas of the 'natural growth' approach (Krashen, 1982)

which rejects predefined 'external' linguistically sequenced input, and rather prefers cognitive-centred and 'internal' basis for grading. That is, learning tasks are selected and sequenced on basis of cognitive complexity. White (1988:104) notes that "the language selection which arises from such a sequence of tasks will be based on the needs of the activity/discourse and manageability for learners." This way, the procedural syllabus could easily turn into "a disorganized language syllabus based on general cognitive principles" (Brumfit, 1984:239).

Another major criticism about this project is due to the fact that it rules out any explicit teaching of grammatical items. It proclaims that the aim of English language teaching should be to develop 'natural' real-world communication skills in learners. However, one might argue that authentic 'real-world' tasks are different from classroom 'pedagogic' tasks (Nunan, 1988). The latter type aims essentially at developing the required 'academic learning skills' but not 'personal communication skills' in learners. The counterargument to this is that the learner will be able to naturally develop the learning skills from the successful development of natural communication (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Still, it could be argued that language acquisition is psychologically different from language learning (McDonough S., 1986 and Ellis, 2006). The latter ought to be a linear process. "Language acquisition, on the other hand, is not a linear progression, but a cyclic one, or even a metamorphic one" (Rutherford, 1987:159). The fact that the complexity of a child's 'internal system' enables him/her to subconsciously 'acquire' a linguistically 'ungraded' language does not necessarily mean that a learner will be able to 'learn' a language through its ungraded 'communicational' tasks (Sheen, 1994). Candlin (1984:41) pointed out earlier that "there is evidence that learners of second languages clearly follow some kind of sequence to whatever level of mastery they feel operationally satisfactory for their purposes".

Another criticism about Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' is that it lacked at its beginning any practical consideration for needs analysis and language pedagogical objectives. Needs analysis characterizes and should precede any proposal of an analytic learning-centred syllabus (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:93). The adoption of a 'natural growth' approach to language syllabus design is taken to reflect that some "syllabus design procedures such as needs analysis, use of inventories, specification or linguistic content and so on, are seen as peripheral as best and as superfluous, or even harmful at worst" (Yalden, 1984:17). In all task-oriented syllabuses, including the procedural syllabus, the selection and identification of tasks and activities are not based on any prior needs analyses which raises problems for tasks grading and sequencing. (Long and Crookes, 1992).

Long (1985), unlike Prabhu, suggests that a task-based language syllabus should always starts with needs analysis towards specifying the appropriate tasks. The obtained target tasks can then be classified into different types. Next, the 'pedagogical tasks' are particularly selected and sequenced to design the syllabus. The assumption is that

these tasks should be graded according to their level of difficulty. Long and Crookes (1992) suggest that simplicity and complexity of a pedagogical problem-solving task can be decided according to some aspects of the task itself such as the number of needed steps, participating parties, and available ways to approach the pedagogical task and complete it successfully. They think that the complexity of a given pedagogical task is most importantly determined according to 'the amount and kind of language required'. However, research has shown that the kind of language required including its level of difficulty is directly related to task type and design. "Task design, in other words, can influence the level of language complexity appropriate for a particular task" (Skehan, 2009). Still, learners may well differ, for example, in the number of steps, amount of language skills, learning motivation, learning strategies and styles, or the available information needed to complete different learning tasks. Deciding that one particular task is more difficult for all learners than another cannot be definitive. Nunan (1988:48) agrees that the various factors that affect the complexity of the learning tasks will always interact with each other, and some of which "will be dependent on characteristics of the learner, what is difficult for learner A may not necessarily be difficult for learner B". Long and Crookes (1992:46) admit that deciding on tasks complexity and consequently establishing criteria for their grading and sequencing is 'problematic'. They add that "little empirical support is yet available for the various proposed parameters of task classification and difficulty". They conclude, "Identification of valid, user-friendly sequencing criteria remains one of the oldest unsolved problems in language teaching of all kinds."

Some writers have approached task complexity in different ways trying to set parameters for task gradation and sequencing. Brown and Yule (1983), for example, come up with general criteria for grading the difficulty of listening and speaking tasks based on factors such as, familiarity of the topic and the participants, number of speakers, the need for listener's interaction, the 'genre' of the spoken text, sequence of events, the existence of support and aids. ***Figure (1)*** below illustrates Brown and Yule's criteria.

Figure (1)*: Illustration of Brown and Yule's criteria for grading language fluency tasks.*

Easier → → → → → → → →	**More Difficult**
One speaker	many speakers
Interesting/involving	boring/non-involving
Simple syntax	complex syntax
Specific vocabulary	generalized vocabulary
Familiar content	unfamiliar content
Narratives/instructions	argument/explanation/opinion
Temporal sequence	non-temporal sequence
Contextual support	no contextual support
Visual aids present	visual aids absent
Learner involved as a participant	learner as observer

Nunan (1989) suggests that tasks on the receptive language skills of listening and reading should precede those on the productive skills of speaking and writing. He justifiably claims that the receptive skills make fewer demands on the learner than the productive skills. Furthermore, he introduces a 'typology' of a three-stage sequence of listening and reading tasks (starting with comprehension, production, and then interaction stage) based on learners' responses; starting from no-response activities and ending with tasks demanding meaningful verbal responses (see Figure (2) below).

***Figure (2)**: Nunan's nine-step 'typology' to determine task difficulty.*

Easier		
↓	A. Comprehension	
		1. Listen/read, no response
↓		2. Listen/read, non-verbal response
		3. Listen/read, verbal response
↓	B. Production	
		4. Listen/read, and repeat/copy
↓		5. Listen/read, carry out drill
		6. Listen/read, respond meaningfully
↓	C. Interaction	
		7. Listen/read, rehearse
↓		8. Listen/read, role play
		9. Listen/read, solve problem/come to conclusion
↓		
More difficul		

Drawing on previous relevant work, Skehan (1996) proposes a 'principled' task grading scheme aiming at analyzing, comparing, and above all, sequencing learning tasks. His proposed system presents three main learning task features that can contribute to task difficulty. The first feature is the 'code complexity' which refers to lexical and syntactic difficulty. The second is the 'cognitive complexity' which includes the two aspects of 'processing' and 'familiarity'. Processing, on the one hand, refers to the necessary on-going thinking while doing a task. Familiarity, on the other hand, means whether the learners have packages of prior 'schematic knowledge' of 'comparable tasks' and their solutions. It also implies the learners' ability to recall the schematic knowledge relevant to the task they are doing. The third feature is the 'communicative pressure' which refers to relevant factors that can affect communicative ability and keep learners under constant stress while performing tasks. These 'stress' factors might include time pressure, modality, scale, stakes, and control (see *Table (1)* below for their descriptions and difficulty implications).

Table (1): Tabulation of Skehan's stress factors in his tasks grading scheme.

Communicative Stress Factors	Descriptions & Difficulty Implications
TIME PRESSURE	The speed at which the learning task has to be done, and whether there is a time-limit for its completion (amount of time provided).
MODALITY	The contrast between the receptive skills (listening & reading) and productive skills (speaking & writing). The assumption is that fluency skills lead to much more pressure than do literacy skills. So, speaking is more stressful than writing, and listening is more stressful than reading.
SCALE	The number of learners who are participating in a learning task and its range. It's assumed that the larger the number of participants, the more difficult the task.
STAKES	How important it is to complete the task successfully. The task has a high level of difficulty if it is important not to make mistakes, and to complete it correctly. Nevertheless, it has a low level of difficulty if the focus is on the process (not the outcome), and no consequences follow from task completion.
CONTROL	Learners' ability to question the utility of the task and negotiate its objectives, usefulness, and completion method with teachers. The assumption is the higher the control, the lower the task difficulty.

Robinson (2001) approaches task complexity in a particular way towards establishing 'feasible' and 'researchable' criteria for task sequencing in task-based syllabuses. His proposed 'triadic componential framework' for task classification and design (Robinson, 2005) makes use of the interaction between three broad multidimensional variables which impact on the completion of learning tasks. These include 'cognitive', 'learner', and 'interactional' factors. Intrinsic cognitive demands of tasks refer to such mental information processes as reasoning, memorizing, noticing (attention). 'Learner' demands of tasks refer to the interaction between two sets of variables; 'affective' variables (such as confidence, motivation, and anxiety) and 'ability' variables (such as intelligence, aptitude, and proficiency). Interactional demands refer to the conditions under which the learner has to complete the task. They include 'participation' and 'participant' factors such

as direction of information flow, gender, familiarity, task goal, etc.. According to Robinson (2001), all three types of demands and the interaction between them can contribute to task difficulty. However, he believes that, of the three, information processing demands particularly constitute "the logical basis for prospective decision making about task-based syllabus design and the sequencing of pedagogic tasks" (p. 33). He justifies that 'learner' demands, such as anxiety and motivation "are hard or impossible to diagnose in advance of pedagogic task performance, and so are problematic as a basis for a priori prospective decisions about sequencing tasks" (p. 51). As for the interactional demands, he concludes that they "play little role in sequencing decisions since specific task conditions will have been determined as appropriate for target task performance from the outset and will be replicated in each version of pedagogic tasks approximating those target task demands" (p. 52). By and large, Robinson (2003) thinks that for the learners to have more than one task at a time to do, not having enough prior knowledge about the task, and not having enough pre-task planning time should undoubtedly increase the complexity of the learning task.

Talking about strategic 'pre-task planning', the influence of 'pre-emptive' or 'pre-viewing' activities on task complexity is clearly well-established in research (Skehan, 2003; Yusuf, 2011; Salimi, *et al*., 2012). After looking into relevant research, Willis and Willis (2001) suggest a broad criterion for sequencing tasks based on a led-by-teacher pre planning. They, for instance, advise that learners can be supervised and trained to deal with tasks similar to the required tasks in advance. Accordingly, the real learning tasks whose training counterparts are found easier by learners should precede other tasks in the syllabus. However, they admit to the fact that "perhaps more work is needed looking at basic task types and seeing how these may be linked into sequences with one task building on another" (p. 177).

It is worth mentioning here that all suggestions regarding 'task' grading draw on the fact that sheer process-oriented language syllabi, unlike pure product-oriented ones, are learner-centred and learning-based. This means that linguistically-driven criteria for task gradation purposes are irrelevant, and, at best, insufficient. Task complexity may well be due to some 'within learner variances' (Robinson, 2001) such as, individual differences between learners' in their language learning aptitude, adopted learning styles and strategies, familiarity with the task content and/or topic, self-confidence and learning motivation and pace, or their response degree to different tasks. Nunan (1989) agrees that many certain non-linguistic factors will 'impinge' upon task complexity such as learner's 'maturational' level. Referring to the idea of the ‘inbuilt syllabus’, he adds that “it is the learners who impose their own automatic order of difficulty by doing and not doing what they can and cannot do” (p. 116). Unfortunately, this type of differences has not been regarded as 'central', and thus, has had "relatively little attention in the literature" (Skehan, 2003:7). Therefore, this approach is clearly criticized for the difficulty, if not the impossibility, associated with the diagnosis and measurement of these within learner and cognitive factors. As one

might have noticed so far, the bulk of the task grading criteria provided by relevant research to date is based on specific learner-dependent variables. Such purely speculative criteria are pedagogically unfeasible, empirically unsustainable (Robinson, 2001); and standardization[7], therefore, is missing. That is, there should always be new task-based syllabus organization and task sequential arrangement in accordance with the specific needs of each and every new group of language learners. It is still arguable whether such criteria, which lack the necessary rigour, should lead to any reliable and valid assessment procedures of the task difficulty. Robinson (1995:101) admits to it, "learner factors, such as confidence and motivation, will always be beyond the control of the task designer, and therefore can play little part in a priori decisions about task complexity."

In addition, the task-based syllabuses are usually associated with two serious problems which are directly relevant to the notion of sequential arrangement of tasks. These are the issue of the 'finiteness' of the tasks and the 'overlapping' between them. Tasks cannot be put in a given order if we are not able to decide on the number of the tasks needed, and draw dividing lines between them. Skehan (1996:56) admits that "we cannot pretend to offer a comprehensive sequence of tasks". Long and Crookes (1992:46) also admit to it and explain, "some tasks, for example, doing the shopping, either could or will involve others, for example, catching a bus, paying the fare, choosing purchases, paying for purchases, and so on, and some of those 'subtasks' could easily be broken down still further, for example, paying for purchases divided into counting money and checking change".

Needess to say that this approach is also criticized for its partial negligence of the what in teaching and learning (competence) at the expense of the how (performance). Swan (2005: 396) explains that the weakest point in task-based approaches is that "the language that is most needed is not all reliably supplied and taught". In other words, learners may well fail to complete an ostensibly easy language learning task mainly due to the fact that not enough attention has been paid to the relatively complex linguistic item the task is loaded with. Also, depending on the instructional milieu, some 'cultural barriers' and 'social factors' might contribute to the difficulty of language learning tasks. Usually, the effect of these factors are not accounted for in the task-based language syllabi (Ellis, 2009).

Thus, it is to be noted that up till this point, as Yousefi *et al*. (2012:1437) put it, "there is no consensus over any established criteria for sequencing and grading tasks". Instead, "there are methods of analyzing tasks, both for difficulty and for type" Skehan (1996:56).

The Case for ESP Courses

Content-based curriculum such as the topical language syllabus implies "the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills" (Brinton *et al.*, 1989). It is distinguished from other types by "the concurrent learning of a specific content and related

[7] Standardization in the 'absolutist' and 'universalistic' sense (Ellis, 2006:432).

language use skills in a content driven curriculum, i.e., with the selection and sequence of language elements determined by the content" (Wesche, 1993:57).

In Content-Based Instruction (CBI), both means (synthetic) and ends (analytic) are considered. This approach is most common in today's English for Specific Purposes (including EAP)[8] courses (Nunan, 1989) because, as Brinton and Holten (2001:251) put it, "CBI is a highly effective method of delivering EAP instruction" (see also Johns, 1992 and Ngan, 2011). Moreover, Stoller (2001:212) reports that many EAP practitioners and researchers now believe that task-based approaches to content-based syllabus design "represent viable responses to the real-world needs of EAP students".

As for content sequencing, a good suggestion has been to grade the content according to the logical conceptual order of the subject matter per se without reference to mere language means. Robinson P. C. (1991:37), for example, agrees that in many ESP programmes "the specialist content is utilized as an organizing device for the syllabus, in order to motivate the students and as a basis for the 'real syllabus' of language forms, functions or whatever the course designers wish to focus on." A considerable number of studies advocating this suggestion are reported in Wesche (1993), Adamson (1993), Snow and Brinton (1997), and Kasper (1997).

Topics which are selected from the students' specialist area are also being frequently used as the organizing unit for the language syllabus while, to preserve continuity, these subject topics may be sequenced in many ways according to special non-linguistic considerations (Jordan 1997:61). There has been a suggestion to grade topics according to their so-called 'depth of treatment' so that "it is possible to move from the more *general* and superficial to a highly *specific* and detailed treatment" (White, 1988:67). This approach to gradation by depth of treatment implies considering the length of the written or spoken language, the familiarity and interest of the topic to the learners, and the number of 'mental' demands involved in manipulating and understanding the topic. Nevertheless, according to Bourke (2006:283), the selected topic per se "is not of much use. It is what one does with it that matters. The topic provides the inspiration for a variety of tasks that pupils engage in." And the whole course will end up, methodologically speaking, with a task-oriented syllabus (Yalden, 1984). Carson *et al*. (1997:367) explain that "task-based EAP instruction expands on the content-based instruction focus on language as a vehicle for learning content by then using content as a vehicle for task mastery". They add that "it is the task that focuses the way that language learners will read/write/listen/speak about content."

Theoretical Rationales for an Eclectic Syllabus Design

It is worth noting that recent advances and developments in language curriculum design and methodology should not be taken to suggest the complete failure of traditional instructional methodologies. Swan (2005:378) rightly points out that

[8] The main objective of an English for Academic Purposes program is to allow its students "to gain skills in both course content at their institution and the language needed for academic successes". (Met, 1999:143).

the complete "rejections of 'traditional' approaches are ill-founded and frequently tendentious". He argues that "countless people seem to have learnt languages over the centuries through the kind of instruction currently condemned in the TBI literature" (p. 386). It should only been assumed that language learning can never be thought of as a simple, linear, accumulative process. Furthermore, one may argue that no one particular approach to language teaching is effectively adopted throughout all instructional contexts because theoretical and empirical research findings to date do not provide a sound basis for demonstrating the superiority of any one language syllabus type or teaching methodology approach (Breen, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2009; and Swan, 2005).

The question under investigation can simply provide the basis for a movement towards the *eclectic approach* to language syllabus design and methodology. In other words, the adoption of a 'multi-approach' or a 'multi-faceted', 'integrated', 'balanced', 'layered' syllabus even along the way in a multi-stage language learning process is suggested to overcome this problem of content grading and sequencing. Wilkins (1976:66) dislikes the suggested solution and describes it as problematic because it is "extrinsic to the idea of the notional syllabus itself". White (1988) thinks that there is no easy solution to this dilemma. He justifies that a teacher who believes in teaching methodology specifications in theory, and has 'idealized view' of the relationship between the instructional approach and the sequence adopted is not expected to be easily reconciled to dealing with such a holistic syllabus in practice.

However, throughout the history of English language syllabus design and methodology, a considerable number of researchers have hypothesized about the usefulness of opting for an eclectic approach (Swan, 1985 and 2005; Brown, 1995; Jordan, 1997; and Ellis, 2009). Long and Crookes (1992:27), for example, call for a compromise and suggest that "when the task syllabus is combined with a *focus on form* in task-based language teaching, the task receives more support in second language acquisition (SLA) research as a viable unit around which to organize language teaching and learning opportunities" (original emphasis). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:30) report that "there is now acceptance of many different approaches and a willingness to mix different types of material and methodologies". Swan (2005:394) advocates this suggestion of integration and proclaims that "a grammar syllabus alone is no more suitable as an overall organizing principle for language teaching than is a lexical syllabus, a functional-notional syllabus, a syllabus of tasks or any other single strand of the complex fabric of language forms and use". Breen (2001) predicts that in the early part of the twenty-first century, the field of English language learning should witness a powerful tendency towards a synthesis of the two product-based and process-oriented approaches to syllabus design and methodology in order to bring about a 'syllabus of syllabuses' or a 'multi-dimensional syllabus'.

In a broad view of the 'integrated' or 'combined syllabus', such syllabus, be it notional/functional or task-based, could have language structure as its

organizational unit in its early stages normally for beginners. So, the functional and notional items are graded and sequenced according to the intuitive level of difficulty of the structural patterns they have[9]. At later stages as students progress, the language tasks could constitute the basic unit of syllabus design and classroom methodology (Swan, 2005). According to Johnson (1996:168), "it is a well-established principle of syllabus design that the unit of organization should change in the course of language-teaching operation". Or, it could have different parts on grammar, skills, notions, functions, situations, themes, problem-solving activities and tasks. Ellis (2009) reports that some studies have convincingly shown that certain L2 structures (e.g., question forms) could be prioritized in the process of task-based syllabus design and implementation. Swan (2005:389) agrees, "tasks can certainly be structured to promote more complex and accurate interaction, and this aspect of task design and implementation has generated much valuable research". This may well be taken to mean that learning tasks have the potential capability of being sequentially arranged according to the difficulty of their linguistic content. Ellis (2009:232) acknowledges that 'grammar' can have an important place in the task-based approach, and adds that it is possible "to conceive of a grammar-oriented task-based syllabus consisting of focused tasks" or "a hybrid one that consists of a mixture of focused and unfocused tasks". He concludes that 'attention to form' is not an option, but a necessity in task-based syllabus at the methodological level.

A good exemplification of this mixed English syllabus is Flowerdew's (2005) ESP course in Hong Kong which adopts a 'more balanced' eclectic approach and draws on elements from three different types of English language syllabi in order to meet learners' both language and learning needs. These language syllabi include content-based, task-based, and theme-based syllabuses. She justifies that "in reality, many syllabi constructed by course designers for their in-house courses do not neatly fall into one specific category, but draw on aspects of two or three different syllabus types" (p. 136). Stoller (2001:213) agrees and indicates that the adoption of an integrated approach to EAP syllabus development could well be the answer, "there is no single template for an effective EAP curriculum, largely due to diverse perspectives on language and content learning and diverse instructional settings". However, Brinton and Holten (2001:251) draw our attention to the fact that it is not easy "to expect instructors schooled in communicative language teaching approaches to achieve the very difficult balance that is inherent in CBI between skills, content and language".

Swan (2005) sums it up and recommends the new approach to a multi-faceted language syllabus as a reconciliation. In such an approach, he describes:

Tasks of various kinds will take their place as components of 'task-supported' instructional programmes, alongside a variety of other procedures which will range from the most 'natural' to the most 'unreal', traditional and allegedly

[9] See, for example, Yalden's 'proportional' or 'balanced' syllabus (Yalden, 1983).

'discredited',
from the most learner-centred to the most teacher-centred, as a complementary components of a multi-faceted syllabus (Swan, 2005:395-96).

Conclusion:

With every innovation in English language syllabus design and methodology, the notion of grading becomes more complicated. It is becoming a difficult job even for experienced language teachers and syllabus designers (Nunan, 1989). Fortunately, the associated problems and difficulties are well-recognized and their existence is acknowledged in the field.

In sum, then, the grading of language syllabus content is inevitable if we aim at successful English language teaching and learning. Extreme caution should be exercised when questioning the importance of syllabus ordering. As Allen (1984:66) puts it, "the choice is not between close control, and no control at all, but between 'finely tuned' (explicitly graded) and 'roughly tuned' (implicitly graded) input for the learner". However, the question would always persist to be on which basis we do select and how we apply the suggested grading parameters. Syllabus designers do not have to expect easily reachable criteria for gradation. An eclectic approach to syllabus design and methodology is justifiably suggested as a solution. Still, the adoption and implementation of the said 'syllabus of syllabuses' should always be accompanied with great care and attention. The likely reason is that language teachers and syllabus designers would not be able to make it easily into apparently opposing theories**.**

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مفهوم التدرج والتتالي في محتوى مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية دراسة نقدية

د. حمدان بن محمد عيضة الغامدي

مركز اللغة الإنجليزية – كلية العلوم الاجتماعية – جامعة أم القرى – مكة المكرمة

المُلخَص

هذه الدراسة النقدية تناقش مدى اهتمام مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية المختلفة عبر تاريخ تطورها بموضوع تتابع المحتوى وتدرجه. وتظهر الدراسة اتفاقا بين المدارس المختلفة على حتمية كون محتوى المنهج اللغوي مرتبا تصاعديا بحسب مستوى "الصعوبة". ولكن هذه الدراسة تظهر أيضا أن جميع الإشكاليات المتعلقة بالموضوع هي في الأصل نابعة من التوجه النظري الذي يتبناه مصمم المنهج أو مدرس اللغة وليس مجرد مشكلات في الإجراء والتطبيق؛ فالخلاف مبني على فهم المقصود بمصطلح " الصعوبة " الذي تغير مؤخرا فأصبح يفهم منه مدى صعوبة عملية التعلم ذاتها كما يراها الطالب نفسه في التوجهات "الطبعية" لاكتساب اللغة وليس مدى صعوبة المادة اللغوية المراد تعلمها كما يراها مدرس اللغة في التوجهات التواصلية "التقليدية" لتعليم اللغة. وبرغم بعض المحاولات لاقتراح معايير عامة تهدف لقياس صعوبة عملية التعلم وتصنيفها إلى مستويات محددة، إلا أن هذه المحاولات لم يكن لها نتائج عملية ملموسة وواضحة؛ لأن عملية التعلم هي عملية عقلية مجردة لا يمكن تصنيفها على هذا الأساس إلى مستويات يمكن قياسها بدقة. فيصبح هذا عائقا كبيرا أمام تبني مناهج اللغة "الإجرائية" الخالصة التي تقوم على مبدأ اعتبار "المهمات" اللغوية التي هي الوحدة الأساسية والوحيدة التي يتم تنظيم وترتيب محتوى منهج اللغة على أساسها. وتخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن البديل غير السهل المطروح حاليًا هو دعوة الجميع إلى تبني نظرة فلسفية متوازنة تنتج منهجا لغويًا تكامليًا يتسع لأكثر من توجه نظري ويضمن تعريف معايير محددة يتم تحقيق مطلب التدرج والتتالي في المحتوى على أساسها ضمن المنهج التكاملي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة ، المفاهيم و الوظائف اللغوية ، المناهج الإجرائية ، المناهج التقليدية ، المناهج التكاملية ، المهمات اللغوية .