

Reviews

Comptes rendus

THE COMMUNICATIVE SYLLABUS: EVOLUTION, DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Janice Yalden, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983.

Writing a review on a subject near to one's heart is like being left alone in a shop with the till open. Temptations are at hand. One of these is to use the occasion to grind personal axes. Perhaps there is something to be said for selecting reviewers for their lack of interest in the topic under consideration. Anyway, in this review my hand may slip tillwards.

First the facts. Janice Yalden's book is divided into two main parts. The first, which has four chapters, looks at background issues and relates thinking in syllabus design to developments in linguistics and language learning theory. Part 2 also has four chapters and is entitled "Syllabus Design in Theory and Practice." It includes a detailed description of five proposed stages for the development of a communicative syllabus. There are then five Appendices which provide concrete examples of lists, data sheets and other tools of the syllabus designer's trade. The first of these Appendices serves as a selected bibliography for parts of the area, and the reference list at the end of the book provides a fuller one. The book is well produced and there appear to be few printing errors.

Canada seems to be almost the only country in the world which talks to both the United States and to Europe (which is not, of course, to deny Canada her own distinctive voice in matters applied linguistic). This makes a book on syllabus design by a Canadian particularly welcome. From where I stand in Europe, we are rich in the paraphernalia of teaching, but low on empirical research particularly in the field of second language acquisition. The States seems vice versa, and the two sides need pulling together. Does Yalden's book do this for syllabus design? She certainly tries, and to an extent the value of her book lies in this attempt. I shall argue later that she does not entirely succeed, but it is certainly a main strength of the book that she views syllabus design in relation to both American and European traditions. Chapter 3 is particularly good from this point of view. It looks at developments on both sides of the Atlantic in the fields of language teaching, linguistics and language learn-

ing theory. I can think of few other books which offer such comprehensive treatment of the background to syllabus design.

A second strength lies in the book's detailed consideration of the mechanics of syllabus design (Part 2 plus the Appendices). Anyone directly involved in syllabus design will value this look into the machinery, and since many teacher training courses deal with syllabus development, I can see a use for the book in that sphere. The Appendices are valuable for the concreteness. Many teachers find syllabus design a nastily 'abstract' topic, and Yalden's Appendices provide concrete examples of how to go about the process. This is the point at which to say that the book as a whole reads well and should be accessible to the teacher with little background knowledge. On page 74 her brief description of speech act theory would, I think, offer difficulties to the uninitiated reader. But this is very much the exception to the rule.

The question of compromise is one which naturally occurs often in discussions on structural versus notional/functional syllabus design. It therefore comes as no surprise that after lengthy discussion of various syllabus design models Yalden should come down on the side of sensible, deliberate compromise between structural and notional/functional, in what she calls a Proportional Approach. Compromise is sensible if we look at the issue from the point of view of what we want the students to be able to do at the end of the course (i.e. communicate, in a structurally accurate way), and if we consider the various characteristics of the two syllabus types. Thus, to retread a well-trodden path: notional/functional syllabuses do not offer quite the same possibilities for presenting the structures of the language in an organised way; and if we accept that organised structural presentation is important for beginners, then this argues against an uncompromising use of the notional/functional syllabus at beginner level (an argument which Yalden follows to a large extent).

But if we view the issues from the point of view of language learning theory, then compromise solutions are far less satisfactory, and it is here that my finger strays to the till. Consider initially Wilkins' concept of "analytic," discussed at some length by Yalden. If I interpret this concept correctly, it implies a learning strategy which places onus on the learner to make, consciously or unconsciously, generalisations about how the language system works. The concept entails, that is, a view of how people learn languages. And if one accepts this view, then any mixture of synthetic and analytic (e.g. by using both the synthetic structural syllabus and the analytic notional/functional syllabus) appears a hedging of bets rather than a reasoned compromise.

In fact, as already noted, Yalden's consideration of language learning

theory goes beyond Wilkins' "analytic," into the area of (American) second language acquisition studies. It is here that the interesting questions reveal themselves. What do these studies imply for syllabus design? Can we *really* say they point to the notional/functional syllabus? And, equally importantly, how does the notional/functional syllabus and the compromises involving it (which many feel intuitively attractive) find justification in language learning theory? To my mind such questions remain both crucial and unanswered. The bridge between acquisition studies and syllabus design (between America and Europe almost) remains to be built.

Just one more finger in the till. Yalden's book provides a comprehensive survey of the syllabus design area and will give practical help for those involved in syllabus construction. Like any book which deals with one facet of a large operation (in this case the operation of teaching languages) it needs to be read with a keen sense of proportion. This should go without saying, but obsession with syllabus design can occur and indeed has occurred at both institutional and national levels. One would wish to avoid years of research leading to massive, unwieldy syllabus inventories which stand no chance of ever being implemented. This is a useful book for those with the sense of proportion to read it.

Keith Johnson

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BUILDING SKILLS FOR THE TOEFL

Carol King and Nancy Stanley, Surrey: Nelson 1983.

This textbook (with four cassettes, and a tapescript and key available as a separate volume) is a complete course of study for students preparing to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). It is geared to students with at least low intermediate proficiency (TOEFL scores in the 400 to 420 range); however, it is best suited for high intermediate and advanced students.

The authors suggest three ways in which the book can be utilized: (a) independent study, (b) TOEFL preparation course with instructor, and (c) course book for intensive ESL programs. They consider 30 hours the minimum and 75 hours ample time to cover the material.

The course book is divided into three sections, corresponding to the actual format of the TOEFL: Section 1 — Listening Comprehension, Section 2 — Structure and Written Expression, and Section 3 — Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary.

The introduction to the book and to each section and subsection is devoted to TOEFL tactics—practical advice and information about the types of questions and time limits—given in very simple language in an encouraging tone. Statements like “the TOEFL writers are very clever about making all the wrong answers appear right in some way,” show experience, sensitivity and sympathy with the often anxious and insecure TOEFL learner.

Following the short introduction, each section of *Building Skills for the TOEFL* sets out 10 main objectives, which are in turn divided into several subcomponents, thus reducing the seemingly insurmountable task of preparing for the TOEFL into “bite-size” chunks. Specific objectives and clear directions are provided for each of the more than 200 exercises, the majority of which adopt a multiple-choice 10-item format.

The following example, chosen from Section 1—Listening Comprehension, Part B: Short Conversations, serves to illustrate this organizing principle.

Main objectives:

- A. Identify the speakers
- B. Avoid sight-sound problems
- * C. Recognize language functions
- D. Relate vocabulary to context

* Subcomponents for (C):

- a) to distinguish between offers and requests (not multiple-choice)

- b i) to distinguish between offers and requests within the context of a short conversation (multiple-choice)
- b ii) to gain familiarity with the variety of question types that might be used to elicit information about an offer or a request contained in a conversation (multiple-choice)
- c) to recognize ways in which suggestions are made (multiple-choice)
- d) to recognize which speaker intends to accomplish a stated purpose (three exercises, not multiple-choice)
- e) to gain familiarity with the variety of questions that may follow conversations (three exercises, multiple-choice)
- f) to recognize the speaker's purpose on the basis of what the language is intended to accomplish (three exercises, multiple-choice)

The example also clearly demonstrates that King and Stanley have successfully integrated a functional/notional element into their course, which makes it, in the opinion of this reviewer, superior to other TOEFL preparation courses.

Another valuable aspect of the book is the section on Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. Only a few exercises are devoted to vocabulary. The learners are advised that there is no such thing as "TOEFL vocabulary," and that intelligent, extensive reading will help to develop active and passive vocabulary. Reading Comprehension, on the other hand, with close to 70 exercises, is dealt with in the same analytical and innovative way as Listening Comprehension.

The middle section, Structure and Written Expression, uses the same approach, but here the emphasis shifts from a focus on meaning to the identification of a large variety of errors. For ESL learners who do not have a good background in formal grammar, the rules and explanations in this section would be difficult to grasp. As a result, such learners would not be able to profitably use this section for self-study.

In summary, *Building Skills for the TOEFL* is an excellent textbook for TOEFL preparation courses, introducing as much communicative language teaching and learning within the TOEFL framework as is possible and presenting the material in an innovative, interesting and visually attractive manner.

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PINT'S PASSAGES FOR AURAL COMPREHENSION I: TWENTIETH CENTURY NEWS

John Pint, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983.

Twentieth Century News sets out with a promising idea, but ultimately is a disappointing resource for the teaching of listening.

The text and tape consist of 20 very short (less than a minute) passages, only 10 or 12 of which qualify as genuine news items ("Nixon to Resign," "Kennedy Wins Election," "Vietnam War is Over," "Gandhi Shot by Assassin"). The other items are also fully scripted items, derived from a written source on such subjects as "The Ordinary Ball-Point Pen" or dialogues between arguing spouses. Finally, although no particular target level is specified, I would judge that this text was designed for high intermediate students.

In assessing *Twentieth Century News*, I think it's important to look at two aspects of the text: the input provided to the students, and type of activities.

In terms of the input, the tape quality is excellent throughout, and all of the items are read aloud quite rapidly, so that many of the features of natural spoken English are present. The news items selected will certainly not "date," although they represent a definite American slant, a feature which may reduce the universal appeal of this text. When the text sticks to genuine news items, the input is authentic to a certain degree; however, when the topics stray to non-news stories about ducks or arguing spouses, it is less appropriate to hear them from fully scripted texts derived from a written source. (Such complete scripting is of course appropriate for the news.) The items included here are so short—the first is 7 seconds long—that it is difficult to include features like redundancy and cohesion which aid native and non-native speakers in their comprehension of the news; and when these features are not included fully, it is impossible to design activities focussing on them.

An assessment of listening materials must not only examine the authenticity of the input, but must also consider how authentic the activities presented are: The learners should, for at least some of the time, be engaged in activities that real listeners perform when listening to that type of material. In order to develop comprehension of the news, a useful set of activities would correspond to both the purposes we have when we listen to the news and to the strategies we employ when we try to decode that information.

Unfortunately only one type of activity is presented in *Twentieth Century News*: The learners are asked to fill in blanks as they listen. The blanked-out items are function words (*of, have, him, etc.*) which are

usually reduced in rapid speech. Pint explains in the preface, “This is not a test of memory or comprehension, but a focus on the way *function words* are stuck together or deformed in everyday speech.”

The choice to design only one type of activity severely limits the usefulness of *Twentieth Century News*: There are no exercises designed to develop strategies like listening for the “gist” of the news item, or listening for words that signal main information, or for markers that qualify or mitigate the development of the information (*In any event, In the meantime, etc.*). The most glaring omission is the absence of any exercises that teach the students the strategy of using the context and the knowledge they already have of the subject to predict information and to create a set of assumptions about the text they are to listen to.

Although the concept behind *Twentieth Century News*—training students to be able to understand news items on the radio—is an excellent idea, the text fails to provide a wide enough range of activities to equip students with a set of strategies that would help them in approaching new texts. It also fails to provide a set of authentic experiences. In using this text, the learner does not progress towards listening to the news in the same way as in the first language.

Twentieth Century News is a text that could be usefully revised to broaden the range of activities and to present only authentic news items.

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LISTENING IN & SPEAKING OUT: INTERMEDIATE

Sharon Bode, Gary James and Charles G. Whitley, New York: Longman, 1980.

This course, the first of two, consists of 12 units of conversational American English recorded on cassette and accompanied by a student's workbook. There is no separate text or teacher's manual, since all the necessary guidance is provided in the text or in the introduction. At the end of the book there is also a complete answer key and tapescript. Bearing in mind the prevailing trend of book prices, the economy of this format is entirely laudable.

Each unit revolves around a theme—a recurrent situation of everyday life or a social issue. "Giving gifts," "Nudity in art" and "Household chores" are some examples. The choice of language and of topics seems to be geared to an audience of college age and over. Everything on the tape is delivered at normal speed and in a normal conversational style. Thus, the initial exposure can be quite traumatic for the student whose previous experience of learning English has been highly controlled and teacher-centred. In the authors' own words, these materials are intended "to help close the gap between 'classroom English' and the English that the students are likely to encounter on their own." In this, they have succeeded; their speech is clear, yet completely natural, being largely unscripted, and the recording quality is generally excellent.

It is clear, especially in view of the absence of prior constraints on structure or diction, that *Listening In & Speaking Out* was inspired by a communicative, situational approach. When using it, moreover, the instructor finds himself left completely out in the cold as an initiator of language stimuli, reduced to switching the tape-recorder on and off at the appropriate moments. This is still an unfamiliar position for those who were trained to be the choreographer-conductor of an audio-lingual classroom.

The recording for each unit consists of three parts. The first of these, called "Getting Set," is a series of four introductory sentences for dictation, spaced but read at normal speed. In the second, "Monolog," one of the authors speaks off-the-cuff for about two minutes, while in the third, "Dialogue," all three authors and the fourth "voice," Bette Matthews, engage in a free-wheeling, unscripted discussion.

The workbook addresses each "Monolog" and each "Discussion" with a series of three comprehension exercises, moving the focus in from the overall tone and the general ideas expressed to the particular words and phrases used. "Summing Up," the first of these, consists of five multiple choice questions, while the last often requires some inference beyond

what is explicitly stated. The second, "Retelling," while supplying certain key words and phrases as a guide, allows the student to recapitulate the content in his own words in some five sentences, either orally or in writing. The last, "Filling In," is essentially a cloze test, with every fifth word omitted after the first sentence, and in fact, the authors suggest in their introduction that it be used primarily for testing.

In this reviewer's experience—in individual tuition with bank executives—this advice is sound; people are either turned off by it as a learning activity or, worse, become obsessed with the search for "the right word," losing sight of the forest for staring at the trees.

In addition, each "Discussion" is accompanied by "Drawing Out," a series of five inferences that may be drawn about the participants or their attitudes after listening, which the student is invited to evaluate as "possible/improbable." As the title suggests, it can readily be used to generate discussion by having the students justify their answers.

For further oral practice, there is a guided question-and-answer exercise called "Pairing Up." Questions are given in indirect form, "Ask your partner if . . .," and two alternative answers are given, while a line is left blank for answers of the students' own invention. Finally, at the end of each unit, there is a list of related topics for further discussion under the heading "Speaking Out," each followed by several questions designed to initiate or orient the debate.

With only two books in the series and nothing but the tape and workbook, the authors have clearly not set out to provide a complete package or to do the bulk of the teacher's preparation. Yet, the objective which they set themselves, as quoted, has been admirably fulfilled.

There is one other benefit—a psychological one—that this reviewer has discovered. Adult second-language learners especially often have the most unrealistic expectations of themselves; going through the cloze procedure once or twice and demonstrating that even the instructor does not catch every word, nor expect to, can help to dispel the delusion that it is either normal or necessary to apprehend every single syllable uttered in order to comprehend speech. Mental reconstruction is at least as important as aural acuity in understanding language and is a skill that needs practice like any other, though largely ignored hitherto in teaching. Here we have, perhaps for the first time, materials designed to provide this practice.

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GETTING ALONG IN ENGLISH

Adrian S. Palmer and Margot C. Kimball, New York: Longman, 1983.

Ce manuel s'adresse à des étudiants de niveau intermédiaire. De façon claire et concise ce livre de 76 pages présente systématiquement dans chacune de ces 12 unités deux types d'activités de communication orale et des exercices portant sur le vocabulaire et la langue écrite. Les auteurs déclarent vouloir privilégier dans ce livre l'intention de communication et le message plutôt que la forme et insistent dans l'introduction sur l'importance des pratiques communicatives.

Le contenu de chaque unité fait référence à un thème (ex. les maladies et les accidents, l'inflation, la circulation urbaine . . .) qui devrait pouvoir capter l'attention des étudiants. Ce livre ne contient pas de stéréotypes discriminatoires basés sur le sexe ou la race et ses illustrations tiennent compte du pluralisme ethnique et social nord-américain. Le contenu thématique est donc de qualité et les messages visuels aussi bien que textuels sont familiers et intelligibles.

Chaque unité présente un déroulement uniforme en quatre phases:

1. La première page de l'unité énumère le vocabulaire spécifique au thème retenu ainsi que des définitions simples et pratiques.

2. Une activité basée sur des dialogues place les étudiants par paire dans une situation de conversation dirigée. Les trois dialogues de chacune des unités forment l'activité centrale du manuel et suivent constamment le même modèle. Suite à un énoncé initial contenu dans le livre et produit par un étudiant (A), deux étudiants (A et B) choisissent à tour de rôle un de deux énoncés suggérés comme réponse possible (voir Figure 1).

3. De courts exercices écrits (une page pour l'ensemble des exercices de l'unité) permettent le réinvestissement du nouveau vocabulaire utilisé dans les dialogues. Exemples d'exercices écrits: associer le mot à la définition, compléter la phrase, rédaction dirigée, texte troué, etc.

4. Les étudiants en diade préparent à l'aide d'indices et de consignes fournis par le manuel une discussion orale portant sur le thème de l'unité. Cette activité est divisée en quatre opérations:

- i. Une consigne précise la mise en situation.
- ii. Les étudiants aidés par des questions appropriées doivent se souvenir d'expériences analogues qu'ils connaissent ou ont vécu.
- iii. Les étudiants notent le vocabulaire qui leur sera utile lors de la discussion.
- iv. Aidés par des indices ou des consignes, les étudiants groupés en diade discutent.

L'ensemble des activités de *Getting Along in English* sont centrées sur le sens du message plutôt que sur la forme et sont placées dans un contexte

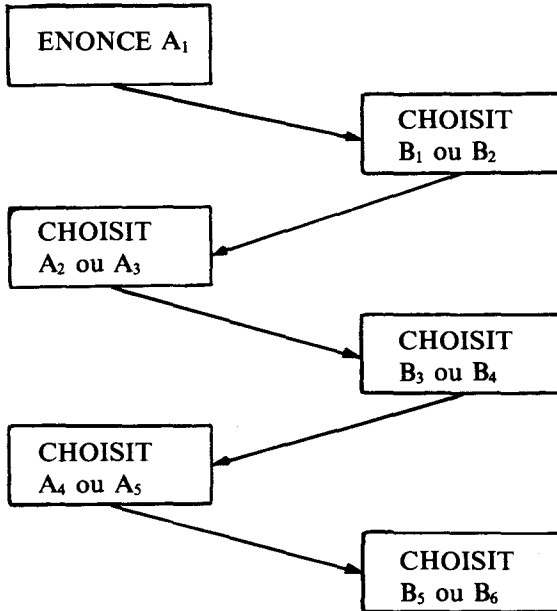


Figure 1. Modèle des dialogues de chacun des unités.

signifiant qui se rapproche de la réalité. Mais hélas, seules les 12 pages portant sur les discussions orientent l'étudiant vers une organisation personnelle de ses énoncés oraux. Les dialogues qui sont fort nombreux (36) limitent singulièrement les possibilités de choix de l'étudiant puisqu'il doit *toujours* choisir le bon énoncé parmi deux possibilités seulement. Une telle obligation ne laisse aucune place à l'approximation. Bien que les auteurs dans l'introduction disent favoriser la tolérance de l'erreur et le respect des intentions de communication, ils ne permettent aucun choix réel des actes de parole dans une grande partie des activités de production orale.

Attrayant par sa concision et sa modernité, ce manuel est limité par la répétition à outrance des activités de conversation dirigée. Il devrait être considéré comme un bon manuel complémentaire qui cependant, ne s'inscrit pas toujours dans le cadre de l'approche communicative.

Alfredo Folco

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