UNIT 15 : APPROACHES TO MATERIALS PRODUCTION

Structure

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

With the help of this unit, you will be able to understand and assess

- various types of syllabuses;
- the interplay between the syllabus and course materials; and
- the role that a given approach to language learning plays in materials production.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we raised, and suggested suitable answers to some basic questions about the nature, importance and shape (print, non-print) of course materials. We now want to discuss other issues crucial to their designing and development. We are using the word 'approach' generally to refer to a set of ideas, beliefs and principles that help course designers decide as to what should go into the textbook, why it should be included and how it should be presented. In the sense, whereas 'what' refers to the general content (teaching items, topics, themes, exercises), 'why' and 'how' relate to the design and layout of materials as well as to the classroom methodology which are based on a pre-existing and therefore well-considered rationale.

You may have come across terms such as approach, method and technique in discussions on language teaching and learning. All these terms are often used synonymously. It is necessary here to understand the notional distinctions that need to be maintained in using these terms. The term approach is used to refer to a set of assumptions about how language is learnt. The Structural approach signifies an approach to language teaching/

learning that arises out of the assumption that language is a set of structures before it is anything else. In this sense, approach will have direct implications for materials and methods. Method refers to a set of pedagogic principles for putting the materials to practical use. The Structural approach for instance, led to the Audio lingual and the Direct Method.

Technique is the actual strategy or strategies employed by the teacher to operationalise the method. Technique is not directly related to approach, though some techniques may come, as a matter of convention, to be commonly associated with a given approach or method.

In our discussion of approaches to materials production in this unit, we are using the term approach to refer to underlying assumptions about the processes of learning a first or second language.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Define the term 'approach' in your own words.

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2. Recall some of the techniques through which you were taught English at school. Comment on each technique in the light of later experiences.

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3. Were you taught English through the Structural method ? If so, name a few language exercises that were used.

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15.2 THE FRAMEWORK

By framework we mean an overall language teaching programme of which materials are only a part. A comprehensive framework should take into account, among other things,

the official language policy and the aims and objectives of teaching a particular language to various groups of learners. Materials, though the most visible component of any educational programme, should not be seen in isolation but rather as an integral part of the overall curricular framework that deals with learners and their needs, the educational setting (circumstances under which learning teaching is to take place), syllabus construction and lastly evaluation and testing.

We are concerned here mainly with one component of the framework, namely materials. A precondition of materials development is syllabus construction. In simple words, a course book is and should always be based on a syllabus which is relevant to the learners for whom it is intended. A measure of a course book's adequacy is the extent to which it has been produced in accordance with the 'guidelines' given in the syllabus.

The syllabus can be viewed as a systematic statement of what is intended to be taught and learnt. It lays down the learning content for a given stage of education. Based on the organising principles which the syllabus represents, the materials producers (it can be an individual, a group or an agency) prepares course materials. It is finally the teacher who employs certain procedures and techniques to make use of the materials for purposes of instruction and inputs. A teacher, who has had occasion to study the syllabus, happens to be the best evaluator of course materials.

Most textbooks carry the syllabus in summary form on their content pages. By looking at them, one can make out the type of syllabus on which the writer has based his/her material. The content page is thus an index of the approach and the design adopted.

15.2.1. Types of Syllabus

Various types of syllabus have been in use for a long time in our schools. Let us consider some of them.

1. Grammatical or Structural Syllabus

The most easily recognisable among them is the one which is organised according to a list of grammatical and structural items, and is rightly called a grammatical or structural syllabus. Which approach does this syllabus type signify? Obviously the grammatical/ structural one. The assumption is that language is learnt and can be taught, through the mastery of its structures. The course book based on this type of syllabus attempts to give its users opportunities to master the structures considered relevant at the given stage. The use of the structure is exemplified through selected texts followed by appropriate exercises.

Here is an example of a grammatical syllabus :

- Simple present
- Simple past : irregular verbs
- Adverbs of time, place and manner
- Participles, infinitives and gerunds
- Conditional clauses
- Now compare this with its structural components below :
- This is..... That is

- Have to/had to (necessity)
- Better than/worse than
- Questions beginning with What, Why, Who
- Clauses beginning with when, as soon as, until, before/after.
- Verb and particle : look into, put up with, give in

As has been pointed out, most English textbooks that you might have studied, taught or examined represent the grammatical and structural principle underlying the arrangement of learning content. Not only in our country but elsewhere also, the picture still remains the same. The reason for this stability in the organising principle is the fact that developments in linguistic research have influenced teaching methods far more than the content of learning. Language courses have followed the convention of defining units of learning in grammatical terms. Perhaps the assumption has been that splitting a language into its constituent parts increases the teachability of an item at a time. Also, sequencing of items according to difficulty level seems an easier and more observable activity. Glance through the contents of half a dozen language textbooks, and you will find that the content, explicitly or implicitly, is arranged to suit the grammatical principle.

The grammatical syllabus has been a subject of controversy for quite some time now. It is considered insufficient for language teaching in that it falls short of the objective of developing the learner's communicative competence. Even after ten years of learning grammatical rules and structures, the learner is not able to 'communicate' orally or in writing. Experience shows that knowledge of grammar of a language is not to be equated with knowledge of that language and its use. Learning 'nouns', 'adjectives', 'participles' and 'conditionals' of English does not necessarily make one an effective user of English. Then, there are certain parts of the grammatical system, such as some tense forms, that you need more in certain situations than other parts that you need in other situations. Teaching all the parts of the system, as if all were equally relevant to all situations, is likely to prove rather uninteresting and not very useful. The process of taking the learner through the entire scope of the grammatical system without providing opportunities for putting that knowledge to an immediate practical use can be very tiresome.

2. Functional Syllabus

A second type of syllabus is based on the communicative and interpersonal uses to which language is put in normal situations. It appears to be in direct contrast to the grammatical syllabus. It emphasises function rather than form and seeks to impart instruction in the hope that attempting to use language in life-like or real-world contexts is the best way of learning the language. Knowledge of formal structures is at best incidental, and is considered valid only in so far as it promotes active language use. This syllabus is referred to as a **functional syllabus.** Sometimes notions such as 'location', 'duration', 'ability' and 'concepts of time' are also given alongside functions like 'making suggestions/requests/enquiries', 'giving advice', 'introducing yourself', etc. It is then referred to as a functional-notional syllabus.

A functional syllabus is the product of the communicative approach to language teaching/learning, which has by far been the most talked about trend in language teaching. We will talk about the Communicative approach in more detail in a separate section.

3. Situational Syllabus

Three more types can be identified, and they are 'situational', 'skill-based' and 'topic-

based'. A situational syllabus lists common situations or settings - in the garden, at school, in the post office. Material based on a situational syllabus will present a series of texts alongwith activities and exercises relevant to learners and expect them to master the language used in those situations. The attempt is to relate, stage by stage, a very limited situation and master it according to the appropriateness of the situation.

According to a situational syllabus, language should not be divorced from its social context, and linguistic forms chosen according to the nature of situations in which they are to be taught. In this sense, the situational syllabus is a move away from the teaching of grammatical items for their own sake, concentrating rather on the learning of such linguistic forms as are most appropriate to learners' needs. In other words, such a syllabus is largely based on the 'predictions of the situations in which the learner is likely to operate'.

It can be criticised on two counts: What is a 'situation'? And, is it really possible to predict a whole list of situations based on which the syllabus can be constructed? One wonders if a situational syllabus will be appropriate for a general language course. Ponder over these points as you look through language course materials.

4. Skill-based Syllabus

A **skill based syllabus** concerns itself, more than anything else, with what learners do as listeners, speakers, readers and writers. It envisages activities concentrating on the promotion of language arts. Such a syllabus will contain a list of items as given below :

- making notes from a talk
- making notes from a book
- reading for primary information
- reading intensively
- using a dictionary or a source book
- writing an essay, a paragraph or a notice.

Notice that, though each item concentrates on a given skill, every item subsumes other skills too. 'Making notes' seems like a combination of listening comprehension and writing ability. Reading for 'primary information' is likewise a combination of reading with speed and (mental) note making. It presupposes the ability to make notes.

5. Topic-based syllabus

The fifth type, referred to as topic-based syllabus uses topics/themes as its starting point. Topics, like titles of textual pieces in any course book, range from the weather to smoking to space travel, the focus being thematic content rather than structural items.

In our brief discussion of syllabus types we have tried to indicate different organising principles that are reflected in the listing of teaching items. Each one has been treated distinctly only as a theoretical idea. In actual practice, though, most syllabuses represent a combination of two, or even more than two, organising principles. Situational and topic-based syllabuses, particularly, fall into this pattern where a situation is linked to a topic and is learnt in a context rather than in isolation. It is possible to visualise a syllabus that is the outcome of all the five syllabus types — in which several principles get interwoven to form a systematic teaching/learning programme.

Check Your Progress 2

1. List the components of a comprehensive curricular framework.

2. Define 'syllabus' in your own words.

3. What is the official three language formula ? Write a few sentences to show your understanding of the formula.

4. Why is a grammatical syllabus considered by some people to be insufficient for language teaching ?

5. What are the shortcomings of a situational syllabus ?

15.3 THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The communicative/functional-notional approach to syllabus design, materials development and classroom interaction has been the centre of much discussion and debate in recent years. The approach seeks to develop among learners 'communicative competence' (the ability to put language to effective practical use) as opposed to purely linguistic knowledge. If communication is the primary objective of all language use, then it should be the primary objective of all language learning programmes as well.

Remember that there is no basic conflict between communicative competence and linguistic competence. In fact, the former is a product of a combination of 'grammatical competence' and what is referred to as 'sociolinguistic competence'. Grammatical competence refers to the mastery of the grammatical rules and structures of the language. It is essential to understand the literal meaning of sentences and texts. 'Sociolinguistic competence' refers to the ability to understand the appropriateness of the social context in which utterances are produced and exchanged. It also involves the ability to produce socially appropriate utterances. Such an ability would take into account features like social conventions, degree of intimacy/formality, status and role of speakers/listeners and the overall purpose of the utterances. It is not difficult to come across utterances that are linguistically perfect but contextually inadequate or even offensive.

It would seem that a functional approach to language teaching concerns itself with meaning and contextual appropriacy as well as with grammatical form, though the emphasis is far greater on the former. As a result, it is inclined towards fluency (sustained participation) and not merely towards accuracy (grammatical correctness). Using language in socially appropriate and well-defined contexts is more important than doing exercises on language. Likewise, learner participation in classroom interaction plays a more dominant role than teacher-centred instruction. The teacher is viewed as a facilitator of learning and the learner becomes an active participant in activities involving discussion, role play and sorting out differences of opinions in academic matters.

Materials produced on the basis of the communicative criteria list language functions and corresponding grammatical forms for the performance of those functions. Topic-based pieces, dialogues and other simplified texts are then followed by tasks and activities in place of the conventional types of exercises such as lists of difficult words and their meanings, or substitution tables.

The classroom seating arrangement, in ideal conditions, is also different from that of a conventional classroom. Learners are expected to form themselves into small groups and move around freely whenever necessary. The new seating arrangement is a replica of a real-world situation in which spontaneity is ranked higher than cold formality.

The grammatical approach dominated the ELT scene till the early 1970s when it became apparent that it was not enough for learners to be 'structurally competent' but 'communicatively deficient'. The ability to produce/write correct sentences, it was generally felt, was necessary but not sufficient. This dissatisfaction with the 'product' of ELT programmes led to a debate which culminated in the development and adoption of the new approach in a big way. Materials were prepared according to communicative criteria and methods/techniques were reshaped according to the requirements of the new approach. One positive contribution of the new movement is a fairly comprehensive

perspective in which language teaching and learning has come to be viewed in recent years. This new approach has provided fresh insights into syllabus construction, materials development and classroom methodology. Terms like 'communication', 'real-life', 'functions', 'appropriacy', 'context' and 'discourse' have gained common currency and the teacher has often felt obliged to introspect over his/her new role. To that extent the approach has been useful, though to what extent it has brought about concrete gains in language education is still far from clear.

Check Your Progress 3

1. What do you understand by communicative competence ?

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2. Define the functional approach as you have understood it.

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3. Which of the following, do you think, is incorrect ? Tick the box.

   a Communicative competence and grammatical competence are not mutually exclusive.

   b. The functional approach helps learners understand only the literal meaning of utterances.

   c. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to understand and produce socially appropriate utterances.

4. Write three utterances which are grammatically correct but not appropriate. Suggest alternative utterances.

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5. What do you understand by 'learner participation'? Write three or four sentences.

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6. Explain the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning.

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7. List any three advantages of the communicative approach.

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8. List three possible problems in the use of the communicative methodology.

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15.4 AFTER THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

No approach can be said to be the most suitable basis for 'ideal' materials construction any more than a single approach can be labelled as the most deficient for the same purpose. The structural approach remained dominant for a long time, and even when the functional movement crystallised itself into a viable alternative, it remained obvious that in actual practice the teaching of structures, vocabulary and other grammatical elements continued to play an important role in the teaching/learning process.

Materials designed on the basis of a multi-syllabus approach have now come into existence representing a combination of different approaches. The multi-syllabus is now the most observable indicator of principles on which materials produced during recent years are based. Here are some statements taken from course books. They will give you an idea of a multi-syllabus approach. These statements have been taken from *Materials and Methods in ELT* by Jo McDonough and Christopher Shaw, Blackwell, 1993, pp 45-46.

- "carefully structured multi-syllabus approach....systematic development of all 4 skills....emphasis on pronunciation, study skills and vocabulary learning....authentic and semi-authentic reading and listening practice....language for immediate communication.

- thorough, communicative practice of grammatical structures...coverage of all the 4 skills....comprehensive coverage of the English tense system.

- plenty of practice in 'core' grammatical structures and deals with language at a deeper level ....covers all the 4 skills...makes students think about the language they are using.

- proven multi-syllabus approach...careful pacing...allowance for different learning styles and teaching situations...authentic reading and listening material ...motivating range of up-to-date topics.

- focuses on the "real English" students will encounter and need to use in today's world...regular grammar sections focus on important grammatical areas at sentence level and above...wide cross-section of real texts promotes reading for pleasure as well as developing functional reading skills...word study... encourages students to be selective in their vocabulary building."

One notices in the statements above, elements like skills, grammatical sentences, vocabulary, learning styles, reading for pleasure, and word study. Each claims part of the mainstream communicative considerations but goes beyond that to include other elements. This combination is an indication of the enriched multi-syllabus approach to the designing of course materials. What it has achieved in specific terms is to endorse and practice a range of communicative criteria and at the same time promote practice in formal properties of the language.

Check Your Progress 4

1. Why is a syllabus, which is a combination of various approaches, likely to be more comprehensive?

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15.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed various types of syllabus. We have tried to show how the functional approach makes a different set of claims for a more effective curriculum construction and transaction.

We have indicated that there is interplay between the syllabus and course materials, and that a given approach has direct implications for the design of materials. We have not evaluated any approach in terms of its usefulness or otherwise. Rather, we have tried to prepare you to understand the interface between approach and methods and materials.

15.6 KEY WORDS

approach — a set of assumptions about how language is learnt.

audiolingual method — a method of foreign or second language teaching which (a) emphasizes the teaching of speaking and listening before reading and writing (b) makes use of dialogues and drilling of spoken English (c) discourages use of mother tongue in the classroom. This method which followed the structural approach was prominent in USA in the 1950s and 1960s.

communicative approach — an approach to language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence. The following materials are used in this approach:

a. different functions such as requesting, informing, expressing likes and dislikes
b. notions of time, location, duration, etc.
c. using language to perform different tasks such as solving puzzles, dramatization, role play, etc.

communicative competence — the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom.

direct method — method of foreign or second language teaching which has the following features:

a. meanings should be communicated directly by associating speech forms with actions
b. only the target language to be used in the classroom
c. grammar or rules should not be taught; grammar has to be inferred
d. reading and writing should be taught after speaking.

fluency vs accuracy — **fluency** describes a level of proficiency in communication, which includes the ability to produce written/spoken language with ease and effectiveness. The language must be good but not necessarily perfect. This is contrasted with **accuracy**, which refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently.

functional-notional syllabus — a syllabus in which the language content is arranged according to the functions that the learner will use the language for, and the meanings a learner needs to express through language.
Such a syllabus contains:

a. the meanings and concepts the learner needs in order to communicate eg. duration, location, etc.
b. the language needed to express different functions (eg. requesting, suggesting,. etc.)

method — different ways of teaching language eg. the Audiolingual method, Direct method.

situational syllabus — a syllabus in which the selection, organisation, and presentation of language items is based on situations (eg. at the farm, at home, the neighbourhood, etc.)

structural syllabus — a syllabus for the teaching of a language which is based on a selection of grammatical items and structures, and an arrangement of them into an order suitable for teaching.

techniques — strategies employed by the teacher to operationalize the methodology they are following.

15.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Brumfit, C.J and K. Johnson ed.1979. *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mc Donough, J and C.Shaw.1993. *Materials and Methods in ELT.A Teacher's Guide.* Oxford :Basil Blackwell.

Prabhu, N.S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

15.8 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1 'Approach' is a theoretical explanation of the process of language learning or acquisition. It is generally based on a set of assumptions such as the 'behaviourist view, the mentalist' view and so on (see Course 1, Block 3).

2. You should attempt an answer independently. Consider the following questions :

- Were notes/explanations dictated? Did you memorise them?
- Were you given opportunities for discussion of topics/ themes? Did you freely participate in discussions?
- Were you made to read aloud prose passages and poems? Did you enjoy reading aloud especially in lower classes?
- What type of homework, if any, were you assigned? Was correction done regularly?
- Were debates, elocution contests, essay competitions, plays organised?
- Did your teacher ever pay attention to your spoken English and its improvement?

3. Most probably your answer is yes. The exercises are likely to have been transformation of sentences such as active-passive, direct-indirect, simple-complex sentences, synonyms and antonyms, summary writing, fill in the blanks, substitution tables, etc.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The official policy on language education; aims and objectives of teaching a particular language; educational setting; learners and their needs; resources available; syllabus; materials; methods; teacher training; evaluation.

2. A syllabus is an indication of what is proposed to be taught in the classroom and how it should be taught. It specifies the learning content in a suitable order and suggests means for teaching the content.

3. The formal school system should compulsorily teach three languages upto Class X. The first language is invariably the mother tongue/regional language. The second language, in Hindi speaking states, can be English or a modern Indian language preferably a Southern language. The third language can be either English or a modern Indian language, whichever has not been studied as the second language.

   The formula envisages the teaching of the mother tongue, English and Hindi. It seeks to promote primary education through the mother tongue. It lays emphasis on the teaching of modern Indian languages. It is expected to be a means of promoting national integration.

4. - It promotes only grammatical knowledge and leaves out communicative competence altogether.
   - It does not provide opportunities for applying grammatical competence to real-world situations. It does not produce effective language users.
   - Irrespective of the needs of learners, it covers the entire grammatical system of the language. In this sense, it is a tiresome syllabus.

5. It is difficult to arrive at a plausible definition of the word 'situation' in a pedagogic sense. To present a complete situation (whatever its definition may be) in a controlled linguistic context is also not easy.

   It is practically impossible to prepare a 'complete' list of situations on which syllabuses can be based.

   A situational syllabus is not useful for a general language course.

Check Your Progress 3

1. It refers to the ability to put the knowledge of language to real communicative and interpersonal uses. It involves understanding and production of grammatically correct and socially appropriate utterances in relevant contexts.

2. It concentrates on meaning, use and appropriacy, and not merely on form, grammatical rules and correctness. It focuses on communication as the main objective of language teaching. It promotes learner initiative and participation in the classroom. It aims at making learners communicatively competent.

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sit down	spoken to an elderly person with the intonation pattern of an order. Would you like to be seated/to sit down please? is an alternative.
How old are you?	addressed to a guest/lady at dinner. Suppose the guest is a teacher and you must know her age, you can ask: How long have you been teaching? That might give you a clue. But why should you want to know someone's age for no apparent reason?
Why don't you open the windows, I simply can't bear the heat.	said to one's host even on a hot afternoon. 'Do you mind if I open the windows?' Or simply 'It's a hot day' is an alternative.

5. Learners are not passive recipients of knowledge. They are involved in activities as active participants. They have opportunities to show initiative, responsibility and ability. They help one another learn and perform tasks in a congenial atmosphere.

6. The teacher is no longer the ultimate custodian of knowledge. S/he helps learners learn rather than pours information into them; monitors activities rather than lectures; adjusts his/her style to suit a learner's styles rather than modifies learners' styles to suit her/his own. A facilitator is at best a manager and not a doer of tasks.

7. 1. It offers learners opportunities of using the language in the classroom.

   2. It promotes all the four language skills in such a way that they can be used in real-world situations.

   3. Classroom interaction, with learner participation in the forefront, is likely to be more interesting.

8. 1. A large number of teachers, whose own linguistic and communicative proficiency is often doubtful, may not perform according to the requirements of the approach.

   2. Textual materials appear less important if not entirely redundant. Classroom activities many lack direction and focus.

   3. Those who are used to other approaches/methods and are convinced of their usefulness will vehemently oppose this approach. Learners will also remain perplexed for a long time.

Check Your Progress 4

1. It will accommodate all the essential features of successful language learning rather than show allegiance to a single view of language learning. It will concentrate equally on grammatical knowledge, communicative ability, fluency, accuracy, promotion of language skills and thematic suitability of course materials.