

Chapter III

Syllabus design and research into task features

3.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, it was seen that language production is mediated by the processes of attention and memory, and it may be affected by the complexity of the task at hand. When revising Skehan's (1998) and Robinson's (2001a; 2001b 2003a; forthcoming) models of Task Complexity, we saw that the manipulation of the cognitive demands that tasks impose on learners may have specific consequences for learners' production.

Although tasks have been used in various ways to promote more or less communicative practice, task as a unit of syllable design is, by no means, the most commonly used unit for syllabus organization and sequencing (Long & Robinson, 1998). In the following sections, we will see that the way learners are expected to use the language in instructional contexts is largely determined by general conceptions about language teaching and syllabus design. After that, a number of operationalizations of task features will be described and their effects on production considered. So this chapter will try to answer the two general questions following:

- i) How do choices in syllabus design affect the way language gets to be used and acquired?
- ii) How does the manipulation of different task features affect production?

3.2 Syllabus design

Syllabus design does not happen in isolation. It is influenced by and it influences the different parts involved in language program design, such as pedagogical and methodological choices, evaluation, and assessment. Theories about language teaching and language learning have largely determined the different approaches to syllabus design. As Long (1990, p. 650) points out:

“The unit selected is crucial for two reasons: first, because it closely reflects the program designer’s and teacher’s theories, implicit or explicit...about second language learning, the process programs are designed to facilitate, and second, because the choice made affects decisions the designer takes in all the other five domains¹.”

Hence, when a unit is chosen by a syllabus designer, the choice is based on the designer’s ideas about learning and teaching, and that decision is also going to affect how and under which conditions that unit is best taught, how language is meant to be used and learned, and how learning should be evaluated. In fact, as Nunan (1989) has proposed, different aspects of syllabus design such as content, methodology or evaluation are so entangled that they are difficult to distinguish, and therefore must be considered simultaneously when designing a syllabus.

Syllabi should provide information about the target learners for whom the syllabus is designed, as well as information about their needs, their objectives, the

¹ Long (2000b) has suggested that the selection of a units determines the areas of grading, sequencing, methodology and pedagogy, assessment, and evaluation.

content as organized in manageable units, and how these units are to be sequenced. In addition to that, syllabi often make methodological recommendations about how best to teach the content, and how best to evaluate such content (Breen, 1984).

Historically, different approaches to language teaching based on different principles and conceptions about acquisition and learning have triggered different types of syllabi, have assigned different roles to the learner, and have promoted a variety of methodologies and classroom practices. A great divide has traditionally existed between models which argue that decisions in syllabus constructions should be motivated by findings in SLA (Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 1998; Skehan, 1998) and those that suggest criteria which are not necessarily informed by SLA (Ellis, 1997; Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1990).

This section organizes and describes the syllabi based on three major approaches to language teaching: focus on forms, focus on meaning, and focus on form. It also reviews the units and sequencing criteria chosen by each approach to guide syllabus design; it examines the role assigned to the learner in relation to the language; it mentions the methodologies and classroom practices associated with each perspective; and finally it discusses the major problems with each approach.

We will first discuss synthetic and analytic syllabus, a distinction advanced by Wilkins (1976), then White's (1988) classification of syllabi into Type A and Type B, and we will finally analyze different options in task-based syllabus design, such as procedural, process, and task-based syllabi. The chart below (See Figure 12), provided by Long and Robinson (1998, p. 16), presents three approaches to

White (1988) provides a diagram for organizing the different options in syllabus design:

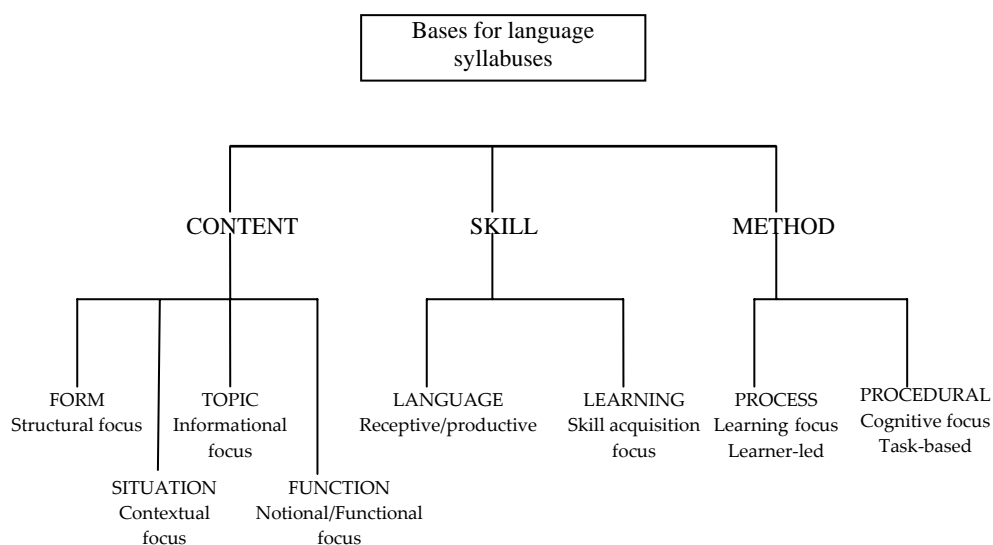


Figure 13. Bases for language syllabus design (White, 1988, p. 46)

Regarding sequence and the timing of syllabus design, three different options are available to organize units sequentially. Long (1985) and Long and Crookes (1992) have proposed a prospective approach to sequencing which, based on needs analysis and in a principled way, would organize tasks in a specific order prior to course beginning. Breen (1984, 1987; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000) has suggested that such decisions should be taken on-line as the course progresses, so that learners' changing needs and wants can be incorporated into the syllabus. The syllabus in this case is an initial guide which is subject to on-going modifications and adaptations. Finally, from a radically learner-centered perspective, Candlin (1984, 1987) has advocated a retrospective approach to sequencing, in which the sequence

of the syllabus units is decided at the end of course implementation. Candlin (1984, p. 32) suggests that “we cannot specify the order of what is to be taught and certainly not the order of what is to be learned”. Therefore the syllabus is just an account of what has been done.

Wilkins (1976) suggested that the decisions about the units and their sequence also have consequences for the role of the learner. Different syllabi presuppose different ways in which learners must assimilate contents and apply them in real life, and how these contribute to interlanguage development.

In synthetic syllabi, design starts with the language segments of various kinds to be taught (grammar structures, words, collocations, sentence patterns, functions, etc.), which are presented to the learner as models. The different items of the language system are presented one at a time in a sequence determined by various notions of frequency, learnability, communicative importance, or difficulty. In this kind of syllabi, the learner’s role is to synthesize the different parts which he or she has learned as separate units for use in communication. As Robinson (1998, p. 8) puts it:

“These syllabuses assume the learner will be able to put together, or synthesize in real world performance, the parts of the language system they have been exposed to separately.”

Analytic syllabi, on the other hand, have a more “global” and “holistic” approach to language learning. In analytic syllabi, language is not divided up into

units. Rather, language is used to perform communicative activities which resemble real life communication. In other words, communicative goals come first, and language is attended to as it is needed to accomplish those goals. In analytic syllabi, learning is meant to take place in accordance with learners' developing interlanguage systems, by accommodating different learning styles and aptitudes.

A broader conceptualization of syllabus types can be found in White (1988), who presents the differences between syllabus types from the point of view of course design, methodology, language learning, and evaluation (See Table 10 below).

Table 10

Type A and Type B syllabi (White, 1988, p. 44).

<i>Type A</i> What is to be learned?	<i>Type B</i> How is it to be learned?
Interventionist	
External to the learner	Internal to the learner
Other directed	Inner directed or self-fulfilling
Determined by authority	Negotiated between learners and teachers
Teacher as decision-maker	Learner and teacher as joint decision makers
Content = what the subject is to the expert	Content = what the subject is to the learner
Content = a gift to the learner from the teacher or knower	Content = what the learner brings and wants
Objective defined in advance	Objectives described afterwards

According to White, Type A syllabi are concerned with *what* should be learned. Without considering who the learners may be or how languages are

acquired, they determine a series of objectives and they 'pre-package' the language by dividing it into small, discrete units. They are externally imposed on the learner who has no say in them; the authoritative role is given to the teacher; they attach importance to the subject-matter of instruction; and they are product-oriented, so they evaluate the outcomes in terms of mastery of the language. All synthetic syllabi, regardless of whether they have grammar structures, notions and functions, or lexical items as their units, are considered Type A syllabi. Type B syllabi, on the contrary, are concerned with *how* the language is learned and how this language is integrated with learners' experiences. The different elements of the syllabus emerge from a process of negotiation between learners and teachers; they are oriented toward the process; and evaluation criteria are set by the learners themselves. As we will see later, procedural, process, and task-based syllabi are considered Type B syllabi despite their differences. As Robinson (1998, p. 7) points out, however; "While these four approaches to syllabus design show evidence of theory and research-driven evolution from earlier proposals, there is also more convergence between them than the different labels might seem to imply."

3.2.2 Synthetic syllabi and focus on forms

In order to further analyze synthetic syllabi, we will examine the units, their selection, and the sequencing criteria used by structural, lexical, notional-functional, and skill-based syllabi, and we will specifically look more closely at Ellis' (1997) structural syllabus, Willis' (1990) lexical syllabus, Wilkins' (1976) and Finnochiaro and Brumfit's (1983) proposals for a notional-functional syllabus, and Johnson's (1996) skill syllabus (See Table 11 on page 131).

3.2.2.1 Structures

In structural syllabi, pedagogic grammar units or lessons are organized around isolated morphosyntactic structures or linguistic forms such as articles, possessives, pronouns, prepositions, questions, conditionals, reported speech or the passive voice. The selection of such units is based on descriptive grammars and on a general consensus about the patterns of language that must be taught. They are usually presented one at a time or in pairs to be contrasted (e.g. past simple vs. present perfect). Irrespective of their effectiveness or their coherence with SLA findings, structural syllabi are the most widespread kind of syllabus and the ones usually favored by publishing companies because of their simplicity and popularity. Skehan (1998) has pointed out a series of potential reasons for the popularity of structural syllabi among the teaching community: they give teachers a feeling of

professionalism; they are easily organized into units without learner interference; they have clear learning goals, as well as precise and well-defined evaluation systems.

In Ellis' (1997) approach, communicative tasks are carriers of structural items. Ellis acknowledges the problems structural syllabi face when set against research findings in SLA (discussed in Section 3.2.2.5), but still finds some acquisitional arguments to defend the usefulness of structural syllabi for language learning. For example, he admits that structural syllabi do not contribute to the full development of implicit knowledge. He argues, however, that acquisition of explicit knowledge can take place as an accumulation of discrete entities, and that it leads to L2 development in accordance with developmental stages. Ellis finds some additional functions for explicit grammatical knowledge: its consciousness-raising role should lead to noticing and intake facilitation; it should help learners monitor their own output; and, in Schmidt's (2001) terms, it helps them notice the gap between what they want to say and what they can actually produce. Ellis adds that grammar may constitute serious and intellectually challenging work that, when negotiated with students, learners may ask for and expect. Finally, the grading criteria in Ellis' structural syllabus are 'difficulty' and 'usefulness' or 'practical teaching experience' or, beyond that, 'general agreement about what to teach and in what order to teach it', the 'markedness or unmarkedness of features, or remedial teaching based on problems identified in the output' (Ellis, 1997, p. 142-143). These are all rather intuitive criteria with no empirical evidence to support them, and, as Robinson

(1998, p. 11) suggests, they constitute “weak, and potentially non-complementary sequencing criteria.”

Finally, and before we move on to examine lexically-based approaches to syllabus design, we should point out that some authors have advocated the use of communicative tasks to teach specific grammar units. This is a reaction to the drills and other rather artificial practice and production activities structural syllabi have traditionally been associated with. This is the case of Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) who have argued that tasks should specify the linguistic focus of instruction. This proposal has been dismissed by some task-based learning advocates as producing ‘structure-trapping’ tasks which actually rely on the same principles of traditional grammar-based syllabus design.

3.2.2.2 Lexical units

Lexical syllabi were born as a reaction to the almost exclusive existence of morphosyntactic syllabi. In this approach, words are presented as more advantageous candidates for syllabus design than structures. Advocates of lexical syllabi acknowledge the disparity between a user’s internal grammar and the units established by a descriptive grammar, as well as the impossibility of applying a communicative methodology of teaching if syllabus specification is based on grammar structures. In this sense, the lexical syllabus advanced by Willis (1990) tries to provide a communicative methodology for language teaching. However, he

still assumes that the syllabus must be made up of some kind of linguistic unit.

Willis (1990) admits that:

“The syllabus specification must, directly or indirectly, consist of an inventory of language forms. I have suggested, however, that a successful methodology must rest on language use.”

The lexical syllabus tries to find more economic and efficient ways to teach grammar but, like with structural syllabi, its ultimate goal is the internalization of the system. For example, the traditional teaching of the passive voice as a complex structure may be simplified by presenting the past participle as adjectives. There is a shift, in other words, from teaching structural patterns to highlighting word meanings. Advocates of such an approach argue that by focusing on lexical meanings students will pay more attention to input and make sense of further input. They also claim that learners will have more evidence to make more generalizations about the language because a lexical description is based on a much more powerful generalization than a grammar description. In addition to that, by easily retrieving words students can potentially create structures for themselves. They believe that words are closer to the categories learners use to make sense of the language system. Learners do not have the complex categories linguists and course designers have in mind, so they must look for ‘surface forms’ which, according to Willis, are words.

Finally, Willis (1990, p. 23) notes that the word as a lexical unit serves an awareness-raising function, and it does so in a much more efficient way than structures:

“If we are to adopt a strategy which aims at awareness raising, therefore, there are good arguments for highlighting meaning; and if we are to do this, the most effective unit is likely to be the word rather than the structure.”

Like some recent proposals of structural syllabi, the lexical syllabus aims at raising students’ awareness of certain lexical and grammatical features of language rather than targeting immediate incorporation of language patterns.

As far as selection is concerned, no real needs analysis is carried out. For Willis, selection in lexical syllabi has been based on intuitions of applied linguistics and experienced teachers in English teaching institutions about topics students may need, and then tasks based on those topics have been elaborated. Willis used corpora such as the TEFL Corpus (or ‘consensus corpus’) to make sure that the typical linguistic structures and speech functions used by most course books were being covered, and the COBUILD corpus to detect the most frequent words in English around which to organize the syllabus. Regarding grading, communicative tasks are also organized according to intuition and pilot experiences. Task items are recycled periodically to solve the problem of ordering. Most frequent lexical items are covered first, in the most common sentence patterns in which they appear, and ‘authentic’ texts are intuitively sequenced.

3.2.2.3 Notions and functions as units

Notional-functional syllabi²² bring semantically defined units into the picture. Proposals such as those of Wilkins (1976) and Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) state that wherever possible, syllabus design should start with an analysis of the communicative needs of learners. Because a single function such as 'seeking permission' or 'requesting information' can be expressed in many different ways, they are to be presented in a cyclic manner rather than in a linear fashion, distributed over a long period of time. In fact, the principles of this kind of syllabus are not so different from those of a structural syllabus. Wilkins (1976, p. 57) admits that:

"It follows, therefore, that the criteria developed over the years for the operation of grammatical and situational syllabuses are by no means irrelevant even in a notional syllabus. They may no longer be the first considerations, but they may still help determine which linguistic form should be taught at a particular stage. The adoption of a notional syllabus, therefore, does not necessarily imply the abandonment of well-established criteria. Rather the familiar criteria are to be incorporated into a new, notional framework."

²² Although traditionally this type of syllabus has been referred to as notional-functional, notions and functions have also been presented separately in syllabi (Jones, 1977; 1979). Notions can be either general, abstract concepts such as space, time, quantity, and quality, or specific concepts, which are usually referred to as "contexts" or "situations." (e.g. 'personal identity' is a specific notion which includes information such as name, address, phone number, and other personal information). Functions correspond to language functions, such as apologizing or complaining (Van Ek & Alexander, 1975). Given the similar criteria used for the selection and sequencing of their units (i.e. notions and functions) they will be taken together in this study and, therefore, they will be referred to as notional-functional syllabi.

After considering students' needs, the designer of a notional-functional syllabus must specify the functions to be covered, the situations in which they must be used, the topics that may be most important for to learners, and the particular structures and notions related them.

In the notional-functional approach, the selection of units is based on various interpretations and redefinitions of Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. In this kind of syllabus, grading is often also based on a vague concept of grammatical difficulty. Grading is left in the hands of the syllabus designer who must use his or her intuition to decide the exact weight of grammatical criteria in the construction of the syllabus. Functions are presented according to their relative frequency; structures are presented arbitrarily since functions usually do not have a special grammatical realization; notions will depend on functions; and all of these are organized around a story or topic relevant to the learners' interests. Weak applications of the notional syllabus could be conventionally grammatical in early stages and progressively shifting to semantic (functional) emphasis in later stages. A stronger application would use semantic criteria to grade grammatical content. The ultimate goal for the notional syllabus, as Wilkins (1976, p. 66) points out, is for the learner to assimilate the grammatical system. Although the learner is said to be at the center of this type of syllabi, they are in fact built in a collaborative effort by teachers, school supervisors, and educational authorities.

3.2.2.4 Skills

Johnson (1996) has advanced a syllabus which is organized around skills. Johnson suggests organizing the syllabus at four levels which involve linguistic units, semantic categories, writing skills, and processing demands. The first level is that of language specific skills, like 'identifying the present perfect' or contrasting /i/ and /i:/, by following the traditional ways into which syllabus designers have identified and organized units (Johnson, 1996, p. 164). Another level is the level of notions and functions, which Johnson argues should be restricted to those for which pedagogic generalizations can be made. For example, between two functions like 'inviting' and 'being polite' Johnson would suggest using 'being polite' because it is less phrasal and situation specific than 'inviting' and therefore more 'generalizable'. The third level in Johnson's proposal includes writing skills such as brainstorming ideas, drafting essays, structuring, and evaluating them. Finally, Johnson's fourth level contemplates the processing demands of the classroom tasks, which should be considered for sequencing decisions. Underlying Johnson's proposal of a syllabus based on skills is the idea that initially language learners draw on procedural knowledge to produce the language which later becomes declarative knowledge. As learners practice the language, attentional demands decrease and knowledge becomes proceduralized. In other words, from initially unattended and unanalyzed chunks the learner moves to attending to and analyzing the formulaic language

Table 11

Units, selections criteria, goals, role of the learner, sequencing criteria, and production in synthetic syllabi.

Units	Selection criteria	Goals	Role of learner	Sequencing criteria	Production
Structures (e.g. prepositions, articles, or verb tenses)	Based on descriptive grammars and general consensus. Presented one at a time or in contrasting pairs (e.g. past simple vs. present perfect).	To have learners internalize the linguistic system. Raise learners' awareness to facilitate monitoring and noticing of the gaps in their output.	To synthesize the different units in real word performance.	Intuitions about the 'difficulty', 'usefulness', or 'frequency' of units.	Seen as the consequence of acquisition, not the cause. Usually associated with controlled practice of a specific unit in more or less communicative activities.
Lexical units (e.g. words, polywords, collocations, institutionalized utterances)	Based on intuitions from linguists, experienced teachers, and on corpus analysis. Presented by means of texts or tasks related to a specific topic.	To lead learners to focus on lexical meanings, as well as to raise their awareness of and to internalize linguistic forms.	To make generalizations about the language from words or groups of words.	Based on intuition and pilot experiments with texts and tasks. Recycling of tasks periodically. Most frequent lexical items covered first.	Citation and simulation designed to produce specific units. Replication of real-world communicative situations.
Skills syllabus (e.g. 'being polite' or 'identifying the present perfect')	Based on the linguist's identification of skills and subskills learners are supposed to master (See Munby, 1987, for an example).	To have learners proceduralize the language. From initial use of procedural knowledge to progressive use of declarative knowledge of the language.	To use formulaic, unattended, and unanalyzed chunks of the language and progressively analyze them until they can be generalized.	Largely unspecified. No specific criteria about which level should be tackled first. Intuitively some notions and functions are more core than others.	Also associated with communicative practice of the different lexical units specified in the syllabus.
Notions and functions (e.g. 'seeking permission' or 'requesting information').	Based on the needs analysis of the communicative needs of learners, but also a vehicle for the teaching of structures associated with each function.	To provide learners with simulated real-world situations and present them with the functions and grammar structures associated with them for their internalization.	To assimilate the grammatical system of the language.	Largely undefined. Cyclic presentation of the different functions and the structures associated with them.	Communicative practice of situations where learners are expected to produce specific functions of the language.

which he or she first used to achieve fluency. When declarative knowledge emerges, the learner can start making useful generalizations about the language.

3.2.2.5 Problems with synthetic syllabi

Although we will not discuss them in detail in this study, synthetic syllabi (such as structural, lexical, or notional-functional) are usually accompanied by “synthetic methods” (Grammar Translation, Audio-Lingual, Audio-Visual, Silent Way, Total Physical Response, etc.), and “synthetic classroom practices”, such as explicit grammar rules, repetition of models, and memorization of dialogues, among others. Synthetic syllabi, which are derived from a focus on forms approach, have been found to have a number of problems related to their units, their selection, the grading criteria used to distribute them over time, and the implicit role assigned to the learner.

In the first place, synthetic syllabi assume that learning is a cumulative process by which learners acquire the units they are taught regardless of whether they are ready to learn them or not. As a matter of fact, we do not know enough about the order in which learners are ready to learn certain grammatical structures. Although some advocates of structural syllabi, like Ellis (1997, p. 137), acknowledge this problem some researchers take the criticism further and present learnability as a major problem.

As Long (2000a, p. 184) points out:

“teachability is constrained by learnability³. The idea that what you teach is what they learn, and that when you teach it is when they learn it, is not just simplistic; it is wrong.”

So no matter how commonsensical a decision about what structure to teach and when to teach it is, different learners will be ready to learn different parts of the language at different times.

Secondly, synthetic syllabi and the focus on forms approaches associated with them tend to ignore important findings within SLA. Robinson (2001a, p. 291) identifies at least three problems. Firstly, synthetic syllabi assume a linearity of language acquisition which has been contradicted by evidence of restructuring and non-linearity of acquisition processes. Items in a structural syllabus are supposed to be learned one at a time, they must accumulate until the learner synthesizes them into a coherent syntax. Although ideas such as the ‘spiral syllabus’ for gradual learning have been advanced in order to compensate for the non-linearity of learning, no evidence has been shown that ‘spiral syllabuses’ are coherent with the learner’s internal syllabus. Acquisition processes often show backsliding (Selinker & Lakshmanan, 1992), U-shaped learning (Kellerman, 1985), and shifts in development.

³ The concept of “learnability” has been suggested by Pienemann (1984).

Thirdly, evidence in SLA has also proven that treating learners as a homogeneous group is unrealistic since different rates of development in certain syntactic and morphological domains is a reality. In addition to that, we do not have enough information about the developmental stages for every structure in English, let alone other less researched languages, to base our grading decisions on such information.

In the fourth place, Bley-Vroman (1983) has also pointed out the lack of linguistic validity of the categories of the descriptive grammars on which structural syllabi are based. Learners build their own mental categories which are usually transitional and usually bear no resemblance to any rules of the reference grammar of the target language. So there is a discrepancy between a user's internalized grammar (the operational system underlying our language behaviour) and a grammatical description. As Prahbu (1987) suggests, a grammar as subconsciously conceptualized by the learner is much more complex than any descriptive grammar. Moreover, as Selinker (1972) and Corder (1981) have shown, language learning is a process by which hypotheses about the grammar are constantly being formed, tested, and revised.

In the fifth place, the idea of presenting items one at a time contradicts the fact that different syntactic structures interact in highly complex ways (McLaughlin, 1990). Long (1985) provides an example, that of how English negation and auxiliary development are inevitably inter-related. Form-function networks are known to be

provisional, since they are constantly being restructured until the target language grammar is finally acquired.

In the sixth place, synthetic syllabi lack real-world relevance. Since in most cases there is no needs analysis, the communicative needs of the learners are ignored, as are their learning styles and preferences. In this approach usually too much language, and too many skills and genres are taught that learners do not need. Vice versa, some aspects of language learners need do not get taught. As Long (2000b) has noted, this kind of approach often results in an inefficient and discouraging learning experience for learners. Production is encouraged in order to practice and produce units in a rather artificial manner, through activities that are not driven by meaning but by a specific structure, lexical unit, or function.

In the seventh place, in actual practice, sequencing criteria such as frequency, communicative importance, learnability (in intuitive rather than empirical terms, as Ellis (1997, p. 137) admits), or difficulty have been rather vague and rarely based on SLA or cognitive psychology findings or even corpus-based findings.

In the eighth place, a typical feature of synthetic syllabi and methods is simplification, by which items that learners need are usually removed from texts, which leads to language *usage* and not *use* in Widdowson's terms (Widdowson, 1978). Linguistic grading, as it is the case with structural syllabuses, usually causes texts to be impoverished from both the functional and linguistic points of view, which in turn prevents learners from being exposed to language they may need to use or may be ready to learn.

3.2.3 Analytic syllabi and focus on meaning

As opposed to the focus on forms approach, the starting point in analytic syllabi is not the language, but the learner and the learning processes. Advocates of the meaning-based approach believe in the existence of universal “natural” processes in second language learning (Krashen, 1985). Imposing an external linguistic syllabus on learners is seen as futile, and they believe that second language learning is not intentional but incidental (it occurs while the learner is doing something else) and implicit (it happens without awareness). This approach, as well as the *focus on form* approach in the next section, involves “holistic” or “global” use of language. Advocates of this approach believe that the same conditions that promote first language acquisition, such as exposure to natural occurring language, should be enough for second language acquisition. In Long’s (2000a, p. 185) words,

“second language acquisition is thought to be essentially similar to first language acquisition, so that the recreation of something approaching the conditions for first language acquisition, which is widely successful, should be necessary and sufficient for second language acquisition”.

Focus on meaning syllabi are usually accompanied by communicative methods and classroom practices such as the Natural Way or Immersion. Content-based instruction, for example, assumes that the second or foreign language is more effectively learned when used as a medium to communicate information that is

meaningful to the learner. There is an integration of content and language, but the syllabus is not organized around linguistic units but rather the subject matter. Long and Crookes (1992) have suggested that in actual practice, in focus on meaning lessons there is little or no teacher intervention to focus on form. Form is left to the learners to work out. They must be the ones who analyze the target language, even if it is at an unconscious level, and therefore only positive evidence is supplied.

3.2.3.1 Problems with meaning-focused analytic syllabi

A number of problems have also been identified regarding focus on meaning approaches to language teaching. Firstly, most of the exclusively meaning-focused approaches ignore the evidence of maturational constraints in language acquisition like, for example, the progressive loss of some innate abilities to learn language which takes place from childhood to adulthood⁴ (Long, 1990; 1993). Adults have lost ability to learn in a natural way, that is, just from positive language input, so negative feedback (such as error correction or rule explanation) is required in these cases. As Swain has shown (Swain, 1985, 1993, 1995, 1998) in successful focus on meaning experiences such as Canadian immersion programs, although native-like comprehension was achieved, productive skills did not improve to native-like

⁴ The existence of maturational constraints is a highly controversial and unresolved issue. Serious questions were raised, for example, about the existence of a critical period for language learning at the 14th European Second Language Acquisition Conference in San Sebastian, Spain, 2004 (Bialystok, 2004; Birdsong, 2004; Muñoz, 2004; Singleton, 2004).

levels. In this kind of programs, the production of some forms (e.g. gender or past endings) has been shown to improve with negative feedback.

Secondly, some contrasts between first and second languages cannot be learned by means of positive evidence alone, that is, from just exposure to the input. Some features of the language cannot be learned by only positive feedback because, for example, some are not noticed. In this case instruction, including negative feedback, helps.

Thirdly, some studies show that language can be learned faster if instruction with attention to code features is provided, so focusing purely on meaning is inefficient. According to this view, then, 'Naturalistic' learners learn more slowly than 'instructed' learners.

3.2.4 Analytic syllabi and focus on form

In the last couple of decades (especially in the 90's) the emergence of task-based learning teaching (TBLT) has given rise to a position which claims to be between of focus on forms, which almost exclusively concentrates on language structures, and focus on meaning, which completely or almost completely rejects any attention to form. According to Long (2000), who is one of its major advocates, this approach tries to capture the strengths of analytical syllabi of the kind presented in the previous section at the same time that it deals with its shortcomings.

Although the analytic approach described in the previous section shares with task-based syllabi the fact that it is meaning-driven, the essential difference between them is the way they assume form should be focused on during instruction. While in the former type of approach almost no focus on form is expected, in the latter, focus on form is expected to take place in overridingly meaning-based instruction. The concept of focus on form, which was originally proposed by Long (1991) and developed by several other researchers since (Doughty & Williams, 2001), is described by Long (2000a, p. 187):

“Focus on form refers to how attentional resources are allocated and involves briefly drawing students’ attention to linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns, etc.) in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication. The temporary shifts in focal attention are triggered by students’ problems with comprehension or production. The purpose is to induce what Schmidt (1993 and elsewhere) calls noticing, that is, registering forms in the input so as to store them in memory without necessarily understanding their meaning or function.”

As we will see in the next few sections there are different conceptions about the definition of task, how task-based learning should proceed, as well as differences of opinion about where tasks should come from and whether they should be based on needs analysis or not.

3.2.4.1 Procedural syllabus

The “Bangalore Communicative Teaching Project” in India was the program in which the procedural syllabus originated. Prabhu (1987) and his collaborators made the change from a traditional grammar-based program to a task-based one. In a radical deviation from strongly consolidated grammar-based syllabi at the time, the procedural syllabus did not take linguistic units as a reference. Instead, it used a series of opinion-gap, information-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks which were radically meaning-focused. Opinion gaps involved expressing a personal preference, attitude, or feeling when faced with a situation. Information-gap was operationalized as information sharing between or among learners. Reasoning-gap implied inferring and deducing from, and practical reasoning about a given piece of information. In Prabhu’s words (1987, p. 2):

“Grammar-construction by the learner is an unconscious process which is best facilitated by bringing about in the learner a preoccupation with meaning, saying, and doing.”

In order to design the tasks to be used during instruction, Prabhu and his collaborators chose the content from other classes the students had, and taught that content in English. Prabhu used a very repetitive pre-task, to feed learners the language. He used listening and visual aids. In a very structured manner, during the pre-task phase, he demonstrated the task with two students.

Long's (2000b) criticism of Prabhu's procedural syllabus is that he used tasks that students would not use in real life; that is, there was no needs analysis. It was, in fact, a random selection of chunks of the content of other subjects. According to Long, it was a classic example of focus on meaning, with no attention to language as object. Other researchers (Long & Crookes, 1992; White, 1988) criticized the rather undefined concept of task, its lack of an evaluative component, and the fact that task selection was based on the teacher's intuition rather than on principled criteria. It was, however, the first attempt to set up a task-based syllabus.

3.2.4.2 Process syllabi

Advocates of process syllabi present a social and problem-solving model for syllabus design, in which the learner plays the main role and where negotiation is the key concept. This model draws upon general philosophical and educational principles rather than on second language acquisition principles, and its origins can be found in the work of Breen and Candlin (1984, 1987), Breen (1984, 1987), and Breen and Littlejohn (2000).

Candlin (1984) rejects structural and notional-functional syllabi for the same reasons as the ones pointed out above as well as some additional ones. Firstly, these kinds of syllabi are externally imposed in accordance with particular educational, social, moral, and content principles of institutions, and they generally ignore the intentions, values, and contexts of the people they are intended for, that is, learners.

Secondly, and related to the first point, linguistic syllabi empower the teacher rather than the learner, and the former becomes the agent of a 'pre-packaged' organization of items. Thirdly, they lack authenticity because they present an extrinsic, static and idealized picture of 'reality'. Finally, from an SLA perspective, these kinds of syllabi lack coherence with findings such as learnability (Pienemann, 1984), which suggests that learners only learn what they are ready to learn, by traversing developmental sequences of a number of grammatical domains (e.g. negation or relative clauses), and at different rates of development.

As opposed to traditional structural or notional-functional syllabi, a process syllabus tries to integrate content (subject-matter) and learning experience, by bridging the gap between what should be taught and what is actually taught. As Breen (1984, p. 56) suggests, a process syllabus is about "who does what with whom, or what subject matter, with what resources, when, how, and for what learning purpose(s)". Hence the focus is not so much on the outcome, but on the process. The process syllabus is primarily oriented towards the people who interpret it instead of towards those who usually specify it. A process syllabus is personal, intrinsic and is one of 'reality' in process. Teachers and learners jointly decide on the objectives and routes to follow, making it a 'dynamic' and 'negotiated' syllabus rather than a 'static' and 'imposed' one. The idea is to have strategic planning at the curriculum level, by setting some general, open-ended guidelines for purposes, content and experience, and evaluation. This would be accompanied by a bank of items and accounts of procedures that can be drawn upon, and also a

wide variety of learning formats and experiences. So, from all these possibilities, teachers and learners jointly construct a working program by negotiating the what, how, and why.

As far as linguistic specification is concerned, Candlin (1984, p. 40) points out that:

“Lexico-syntactic items become part of the discourse in the classroom context, the main object of which process is to enable the pragmatic principles of the participants to be matched against each other in the context of understanding and producing text...Grammar...is not an object of focus, it is a means for action and a motive for evaluative judgment.”

Candlin’s idea for a syllabus is therefore characterized by a series of problem-solving tasks which are used to identify values, negotiate meaning, and generate comprehensible input by the learner. With these types of tasks, the learner does not focus on the language but on the non-linguistic outcomes of the task.

In an early definition of his concept of task, Breen (1987, p. 23) sees tasks as:

“Any structural language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. ‘Task’ is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language-learning – from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulation and decision-making.”

In a more recent version of the process syllabus, Breen and Littlejohn (2000) emphasize the central role of procedural negotiation in syllabus design, by means of which learners discuss their theories, goals, and intentions for learning with teachers and other peers, which contributes to improved classroom discourse. Apart from other social, cultural, and educational arguments that support negotiation, Breen and Littlejohn suggest that procedural negotiation leads to language acquisition since it promotes negotiation of meaning, diversifies input, provides opportunities for learner output, and leads them to evaluate appropriateness and accuracy of language. Regarding focus on form and explicit metalinguistic information, Breen and Littlejohn point out that they must take place when it is most needed by the learner, when facing a communication problem, when he or she notices a gap in her knowledge of the language (both in input and output), when he or she wishes to make language more manageable, or simply when he or she is interested in such information.

The syllabus specifies the range of decisions that can be negotiated (i.e. purposes, content, ways of working together, evaluation), the steps in the negotiation process (i.e. identifying and addressing decisions to be made, negotiating the outcomes of such decisions, evaluating outcomes and the appropriateness of the process), and the different levels in the classroom curriculum (i.e. educational curriculum, specific subject/language curriculum, a course, a series of lessons, a sequence of tasks, or a particular task). So tasks are not based on needs analysis but are negotiated between teachers and students.

Breen and Littlejohn (2000, p. 36) define task as:

“Any single structured/planned classroom undertaking which directly serves or is directly related to the teaching-learning of the foreign language. It has its own objective(s), content, working procedure, and implicit or explicit criteria for success in its accomplishment”.

Both Candlin and Breen and Littlejohn admit that long-term planning with this kind of syllabus is problematic, and they therefore propose a retrospective design of syllabi, by which the content, experiences, working procedures, and evaluation are specified at the end of the course.

A number of theoretical and practical faults have been found with process syllabus. Firstly, Long and Crookes (1992) criticize the arbitrary selection which is the consequence of the lack of needs analysis which, if properly carried out, brings relevance and efficiency to the use of classtime. Secondly, process syllabi also lack a reasoned proposal for task sequencing, which seems to be based exclusively on the learner’s wants and wishes. Additionally, questions have also been raised about the fact that they do not provide any theory or research in SLA for their evaluation. Furthermore, despite SLA findings, process syllabi make no provision for focus on form, a decision that is left entirely to learners. Furthermore, some practical criticisms have been the fact that it assumes a high degree of autonomy and a high degree of expertise in teachers, it radically questions authority which would be unacceptable in some contexts, and it makes a high demands on the range of

teaching materials and learning resources. It can be argued, however, that these practical problems do not necessarily lessen the validity of such an approach.

3.2.4.3 Task-based syllabi

Like advocates of process syllabi, proponents of task-based syllabi such as Long (1985, 2000b; Long & Crookes, 1992) and Skehan (1998) reject synthetic syllabi for the reasons mentioned in Section 2.4.2.5. As with process syllabi, in task-based syllabi, meaning is primary, and the learner is in control of his or her own learning. Language tasks are seen as meaningful activities and not as vehicles to implement a grammatical or lexical syllabus. Tasks alone are the units of syllabus design. The main difference between process and task-based syllabi is the negotiation process. In the task-based approach, especially in the case of Long, tasks are determined by a needs analysis, they are selected and sequenced in a principled way in accordance with findings in psycholinguistics and SLA, and they are implemented according to task-based learning methodological principles. In a process syllabus, there is no actual needs analysis but a 'wants' analysis, and negotiation permeates all aspects of curriculum design, even the principles on which it is based.

Certainly, the difference between Long's and Skehan's ideas about tasks is not so much based on actually radically different approaches, but on their focus. For Long, who speaks from an interactionist perspective, the ultimate goal is to achieve tasks that will generate negotiation of meaning, which is what, in his opinion, leads

to interlanguage development. From an information-processing perspective, Skehan focuses on how tasks and the manipulation of their internal features can be manipulated to achieve more accurate and complex language. In fact they are united by their overriding interest in tasks being the vehicles of meanings, not forms, as well as by their emphasis on the importance of focus on form.

According to Michael Long (1985, 2000a, 2000b; Long & Robinson, 1998) the process of designing and implementing a task-based program can be divided into a number of steps. Given that the unit of a task-based program is the task, a thorough needs analysis must be carried out to identify the target tasks learners will have to perform in English. These are real world things people do. Once target tasks have been identified, they must be organized into target task types. This implies creating more abstract categories into which several similar target tasks can fit. From target task types, pedagogic tasks must be drawn up and adjusted to learners' age and proficiency level. The idea is to create a series of discrete pedagogic tasks and arrange them according to their increasing complexity in order to prepare learners for often highly complex target tasks. The syllabus must be implemented with adequate methodology and pedagogy. Based on his interactionist theory of second language acquisition, Long proposes and defends the principle of focus on form, which implies various ways to provide feedback when communication problems incidentally arise in otherwise mainly meaning-focused classes. Some examples of pedagogic applications of such a methodological principle would be providing negative feedback, recasting students' erroneous utterances, error correction, and

explicit grammar rule explanations, among others.⁵ The choice among the pedagogic options will depend on teacher preferences and conditions of learners (e.g. age, educational background, etc.). Finally, and although they will not be discussed here, task-based assessment and program evaluation are also part of Long's approach to task-based course design.

Although Long and Skehan share the acquisitional arguments behind task-based learning, there is a series of differences between them. In the first place, Skehan (1998) acknowledges that although a needs analysis is desirable in order to determine the tasks to be included in the syllabus, it is not always possible to carry out in practice. Secondly, Skehan's focus is not so much on creating opportunities for language acquisition by engaging in output during interaction, since engaging in output *per se* does not lead to acquisition. In his view, we need to know task characteristics in order to determine what cognitive demands they impose on learners, the ultimate goal being selecting them in such a way as to foster balanced language development in the areas of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. That is why Skehan focuses on the different factors affecting students' production, such as planning time (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997) or aptitude (Skehan, 1998). Thirdly, regarding sequencing, Skehan states that findings about the differential effects of the different task variables on production should inform

⁵ For pedagogic choices regarding focus on form see Long and Robinson (1998) and Doughty and Williams (1998).

Table 12

Units, selection criteria, goals, roles of the learner, sequencing criteria, and production in focus on meaning, procedural, process, and task-based analytic syllabi.

Syllabi	Units	Selection criteria	Goals	Role of learner	Sequencing criteria	Production
Focus-on-meaning (e.g. immersion programs or content-based teaching)	Subject-matter, conceptual units.	Determined by subject-matter specialists and/or linguists.	To promote the acquisition of language through the content presented to learners.	To 'naturally' or implicitly assimilate the language which is presented in meaningful contexts.	Largely unspecified. Determined by the subject-matter.	Production is encouraged to communicate the subject-matter without any specific focus on form.
Procedural	Tasks (e.g. information gap, opinion-gap, or reasoning-gap).	Intuitively selected from other subjects.	To promote learning through concern with meaning, saying, and doing.	To learn the language by means of an unconscious process facilitated by engaging in task performance.	According to their difficulty along the amount of information and reasoning, and the degree of precision, familiarity, and abstractness.	Learners engage in task performance to accomplish objectives determined by the task, which drives acquisition.
Process	Subject-matter or linguistic units of the learners' own choosing presented as tasks.	Jointly negotiated between teachers and learners.	To integrate content and learning experience.	To take responsibility in the decision-making process of syllabus construction and implementation.	Largely unspecified. Dependent on joint decisions between learners and teachers.	Production is encouraged through negotiation of objectives and activities as well as communication of meanings.
Task-based	Tasks as pedagogic approximations to real-world target tasks.	If possible, determined by needs analysis of real-world target tasks, and designed according to what is known about information-processing and SLA.	To promote acquisition by engaging learners' information-processing mechanisms, and a balanced development of fluency, complexity, and accuracy.	To analyze the language as it is needed for the completion of task objectives.	Complexity factors related to information-processing which determine task arrangements from simple to complex.	Production seen as a potential motor of acquisition. Production may be geared to any, some, or all the areas of production (i.e. fluency, accuracy, or complexity).

syllabus designers' decisions when selecting and sequencing tasks from easy to difficult (as was seen in Section 2.4.1).

3.2.5 The issue of grading and sequencing

We have seen that the selection of units for syllabus design affects all the other aspects of program design, from methodology to evaluation. I would like to argue here that the selection of the types of units has in turn largely determined the grading and sequencing of such units in a syllabus.

As we saw in the previous section, in synthetic syllabi, whether structural, lexical, or functional-notional, grading of syllabus units is quite an intuitive activity which depends on various notions of 'difficulty', 'usefulness' or 'frequency'. Hence, it was seen that structural syllabi have traditionally used sequencing criteria such as 'difficulty', 'usefulness', or 'general agreement' to decide on the order in which linguistic material should be presented to learners. In most cases, if not all, the various concepts of difficulty or usefulness have been left unexplained. Ellis (1993) suggested the teaching of marked features, since unmarked features can be learned naturally by learners. As Robinson (1998) points out, the definition of markedness and the implicit idea that unmarked features do not need focused attention remains a problem. Ellis also suggested on-line modification of the syllabus to correct errors made by learners during course implementation. These, however, are non-complementary criteria. In lexical syllabi, frequency has been the basic criterion for

sequencing units, with most frequent items being taught first. Recycling (e.g. spiral syllabi) has been used as a solution to one-time presentation of linguistic items, and in notional-functional syllabi the relative frequency of functions was used as a sequencing criterion.

The only non-intuitive, data-driven proposal for the sequencing of structural syllabi was advanced by Pienemann (1998) who suggested the use of what we know about the stages in which structures are learned to organize a syllabus which is coherent with acquisition. This idea, although compelling, is limited by the fact that we only have information about a small number of structures and in only a few languages, which makes reasoned structural sequencing difficult. Within analytic syllabi with an almost exclusive focus on meaning, we saw that procedural syllabi had quite a random selection and sequencing of tasks. Finally, we have seen that in process syllabi tasks are jointly negotiated between teachers and learners and therefore organized according to learners' wants and needs. These criteria are born from an almost exclusive pedagogic interest which goes beyond language acquisition. In content-based syllabi, sequencing is the result of incorporating the intuition of experts in the subject matter into syllabus design.

3.3 Research into task features

While the previous sections tried to answer the first question posed at the beginning of this chapter, we now turn to answering the second question. As we saw in Chapter II, research in the last few decades has tried to isolate the different

variables involved in task design in order to test their effects on production and development. At this point it may be useful to refer once more to Robinson's (2001a; 2001a; 2003b; forthcoming) table which organized task features into different dimensions (See Table 13 below). In this section, a number of variables that are not specifically related to this study will be briefly described, and one or two representative studies for each variable will be outlined as a way of example. For each study the task types used in the experiments will be mentioned, the operationalization of the variable will be specified, the measurements described, and the main findings summarized. The variables which are specifically related to this study (i.e. +/- Planning Time and +/- Here-and-Now) will be detailed in Chapter 4.

Table 13

Robinson's division of task feature into complexity, conditions, and difficulty dimensions, based on Robinson (2001a; 2001a; 2003a; forthcoming).

Cognitive factors	Interactive factors	Difficulty factors
Task complexity	Task conditions	Task difficulty
a) resource directing	a) participation variables	a) affective variables
e.g., +/- few elements	e.g., one way/two way	e.g., motivation
+/- Here-and-Now	convergent/divergent	anxiety
+/- no reasoning demands	open/closed	confidence
b) resource dispersing	b) participant variables	b) ability variables
e.g., +/- planning	e.g., gender	e.g., aptitude
+/- single task	familiarity	proficiency
+/- prior knowledge	power/solidarity	intelligence

3.3.1 One-way versus two-way

The distinction between one-way and two-way tasks has to do with how information is distributed among the participants and how it flows. In one-way tasks, one of the members possesses all the information, which he or she must provide to the listener in order for the listener to do something with it, so the information flows in one direction. This does not mean that one-way tasks cannot be interactive, it is only that one member possesses all the information that the other member needs to complete the task. In two-way tasks, each member (in a dyad or in a larger group) has only part of the information, which he or she must necessarily share with the others for the task to be completed successfully. Information, therefore, flows in more than one direction. According to Pica et al. (1993, p. 21), tasks in which only one member of a dyad or group possesses all the information which is required by the other member/s to complete the task are referred to as information-gap tasks, whereas when both or all the members have part of the information which is required to complete the task we have a jigsaw task. As Pica and Doughty (1988, p. 44) put it: "In such activities, each participant has information which is unknown to fellow participants but is required by them in order to execute a task successfully".

An example of a one-way task would be one in which a member of a dyad has the information about how to get from one point in a map to another, and gives directions to the listener (or listeners) in order for her to draw the route on an empty map. An example of a two-way task would be a statistical report of, say, movie sales

in the last five years, in which each member in a dyad or group is given information about only one year. A chart must be filled out and completed with the information each person has, and only if each member shares his or her information with the others can the chart be completed. In other words, it is required of the members in a dyad or group to share the information they have in order for the task to be completed.

Gass and Varonis (1985) used a picture-drawing task and information-gap detective story, which they compared in terms of the indicators of negotiation of meaning that they generated. The one-way group did the picture-drawing task by having speakers give instructions to the listeners about what to draw. In the two-way group, each member had information about the detective story that the others lacked. Gass and Varonis (1985) found that, although not to a significant degree, the picture-drawing task they used for the one-way condition caused more indicators of unaccepted input on the part of the listener than on both interlocutors in a detective story, the information-gap task, which was used for the two-way condition. They concluded that in two-way tasks, because there is a greater shared background than in one-way tasks, there are fewer opportunities for communication breakdowns. As Gass and Varonis pointed out (1985, p. 159), "the greater the shared set of assumptions, the less need for negotiation...the kind of task interacts with the amount of shared background that the participants bring to the task." In their discussion of the results, they emphasized the importance of task familiarity, which may cause negotiation of meaning episodes to decrease.

In a study framed within the interactionist approach to language teaching, Pica and Doughty (1988) used two-way information-gap tasks, a decision-making and a garden-planting task, in order to measure the effect of information flow on interaction, as well as the differences between teacher-fronted and student-to-student interaction. They predicted that tasks performed in small groups, as opposed to in a teacher-fronted fashion, would generate more episodes of negotiation of meaning. In order to measure such an impact they calculated the percentage of clarification requests, confirmation and comprehension checks, and self- and other-repetitions. Although their results were not statistically significant due to the small sample of learners used, they found a number of advantages for two-way information-gap tasks: firstly, they showed that if information is distributed equally among participants and each participant has information the other participants do not have but need in order to complete the task, the information during the tasks flows in two ways ensuring more balanced levels of participation than the ones achieved in open discussions, in which more advanced or more confident learners tend to dominate conversations; secondly, the fact that information flows between or among learners, and not between learners and teachers, generates more interactional moves (clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks) of the kind that is supposed to lead to language acquisition; thirdly, like Long (1990) who claims that two-way tasks generate more

negotiation of meaning⁶, the fact that the information-gap task forces one single solution actually generates more interactional moves than open discussions in which there can be several different solutions and it is not absolutely required to share the information by each participant for the task to be successfully completed.

If we take studies on the information flow of tasks together, there seems to be a consensus that two-way tasks contribute to the development of overall proficiency because they generate more episodes of negotiation of meaning. Researchers who have questioned the interactionist hypothesis have claimed that tasks that have been designed to create too many communication breakdowns for learners to repair have been shown to be discouraging and demotivating. Aston (1986) presented tasks that generated negotiated interaction as frustrating and error-laden communicative experience. This was contradicted by Oliver (1995) who showed that, during two-way performance, mostly conversation flows but negative feedback (recasts and negotiated input) also happens consistently.

3.3.2 Open versus closed tasks

In a very early, tentative, and highly influential proposal, Long (1990) advocated the use of 'closed' tasks over 'open' tasks. Long defined open tasks as those in which there is no predetermined correct solution but a wide range of

⁶ Gass and Varonis (1985, p. 151) define negotiation of meaning as "those side sequences that are crucial to the success of the discourse because they let participants maintain as well as possible equal footing in the conversation (...) nonunderstanding routines which we operationally define as those exchanges in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete." They defend negotiation of meaning as crucial because it lets interlocutors manipulate and modify input, which in their view facilitates acquisition.

solutions that can be accepted. An example of an open task would be a debate about a controversial issue to which each learner in a group or in the class can contribute ideas. Closed tasks, on the other hand, are designed in such a way that they force learners to work out a single solution or a very limited number of solutions, a fact that must be known by the students. An example of a closed task would be an information-gap task in which learners must spot 10 differences in a picture. Long rejected open tasks (i.e. free conversation) on the basis of their inefficacy for negotiation of meaning. In such free conversations, topics are usually treated briefly and are dropped when serious problems arise, less feedback is provided by the interlocutors, less often incorporated by the receiver of feedback, and linguistic material is less often recycled than with closed tasks. This view was also supported by Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) who suggested that closed tasks promote more negotiation of meaning, which will trigger comprehensible input and will also focus students attention on form and are, therefore, preferable to open tasks.

Rahimpour (1997), from a variationist stance (Tarone, 1995), carried out a study in which he manipulated narrative tasks both at the level of their cognitive complexity (Here-and-Now versus There-and-Then) and their condition (open versus closed), and studied the effects of such manipulation on L2 learners' performance. Open tasks were operationalized by asking the learner to tell a story from a comic strip to the researcher in an unrestricted way. The closed task was operationalized by asking the learner to tell the story to a native speaker in the presence of the researcher so that the volunteer interactant would select the right

pictures of the story to put them in order. The number of sentence nodes per T-unit were used to measure structural complexity, the percentage of lexical words to measure lexical variety, the number of error-free units and target-like use of articles was used to measure accuracy, and the number of words per pause was used to measure fluency. Rahimpour predicted that closed tasks (i.e. with one pre-determined solution) would elicit greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity than open tasks (i.e. with a range of possible solutions). His findings partially confirmed his hypothesis. He found that closed tasks generated significantly more fluent speech, but there was only a trend for higher accuracy in closed tasks, and no differences in complexity between open and closed tasks.

3.3.3 Convergent vs. divergent tasks

Duff (1986) suggested a classification of tasks according to the goal-orientation of the task. For Duff, tasks where learners shared the goal of jointly finding an acceptable solution can be referred to as convergent tasks. Such is the case of most problem-solving tasks. A traditional example is the “desert island” task in which learners must agree on a limited number of objects to take to the island and must therefore work together to find an acceptable solution. In divergent tasks, on the other hand, learners have independent or even opposite goals to accomplish. This is the case with debates in which typically each group is assigned an opposite position on a controversial issue that they must defend.

Duff (1986) compared two problem-solving and two debates between Chinese and Japanese students organized into dyads. In order to measure the level of participation, Duff counted the number of turns, the number of C-units and sentence nodes per C-units were used to measure complexity, and the number of questions was used to measure interaction. She found that convergent, problem-solving tasks, generated more frequent turn-taking, shorter turns, shorter and less syntactically complex language than debates. She also found that problem-solving tasks generated more referential questions and confirmation checks, whereas debates triggered more self- and other- paraphrasing, and more clarification requests and comprehension checks. Judging from the comprehensible input framework, she concluded that convergent, problem-solving tasks were more appropriate for SLA than divergent, debate tasks, because convergent tasks generated more negotiation of input and clarification of meaning, at the level of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics than their counterparts. Duff also found that problem-solving and debate tasks are more suitable for higher levels, since they are more linguistically, socially, and cognitively challenging than information-gap or jigsaw tasks.

The three variables explored so far have in common the fact that they reflect how learners participate in the exchange, and so are interested in interactional moves and turn-taking. However, other variables that deal with the cognitive operations engaged during task performance have also been researched, some of them quite extensively.

Table 14.

Studies, task types, operationalization, hypotheses, measurements, and general findings related to interactional features.

Interactional features	Studies	Task types	Operationalization	Hypotheses	Measurements	General findings
<p>one-way: the speaker has all the information to be transacted so information flows mainly from speaker to listener.</p> <p>vs.</p> <p>two-way: both/all speakers have part of the information which must be shared, so information flows both ways.</p>	<p>Gass and Varonis (1985)</p> <p>Pica and Doughty (1988)</p>	<p>A picture-drawing task.</p> <p>An information-gap detective story.</p> <p>A decision-making task.</p> <p>A plant-gardening task</p>	<p>In the picture drawing task, the speaker gave instructions for listener to draw. In information-gap detective story, each member had information that the others lacked.</p> <p>Two-way information tasks in teacher-fronted (i.e. learners follow teachers instructions) and small groups (i.e. four learners share information to accomplish task objectives).</p>	<p>Two-way tasks would generate more episodes of unaccepted input.</p> <p>Two-way tasks in small groups would generate more conversational modifications.</p>	<p>Direct and indirect indicators of unaccepted input</p> <p>Clarification requests</p> <p>Confirmation checks</p> <p>Comprehension checks</p> <p>Percentage of self-repetitions</p> <p>Percentage of other-repetitions</p>	<p>No difference in the number of indicators of negotiation of meaning between one-way and two-way tasks. In two-way tasks a greater shared background provides fewer opportunities for communication breakdowns.</p> <p>More balanced levels of participation when information is equally distributed among participants.</p> <p>Small group work generates more conversational modifications than teacher-fronted work.</p> <p>Closed, information gap tasks generate more conversational modifications than open discussions.</p>
<p>open: no predetermined correct solution is expected.</p> <p>vs.</p> <p>closed: they force learners to find one solution or a limited number of solutions.</p>	Rahimpour (1997)	One-way narrative comic strips.	<p>In open tasks speaker could tell story in an unrestricted way.</p> <p>In closed tasks speakers had to tell the story in a specific way for a learner to organize pictures in the right order</p>	Closed tasks would generate greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity	<p>The number of words per pause was calculated for fluency</p> <p>The number of S-nodes per T-units for structural complexity</p> <p>The percentage of lexical words for lexical complexity</p> <p>The number of error-free T-Units and the TLU of articles</p>	<p>Closed tasks generated more fluent speech, a trend for higher accuracy of closed tasks, and no differences in complexity between open and closed tasks.</p> <p>In general, closed tasks have been shown to generate a higher number of episodes of negotiation of meaning.</p>
<p>convergent: learners jointly share the goal of finding a solution</p> <p>vs.</p> <p>divergent: learners have independent or divergent goals to accomplish.</p>	Duff (1986)	<p>Two problem-solving tasks.</p> <p>Two debates.</p>	<p>In the problem-solving tasks learners were meant to solve a given problem together.</p> <p>In debates the same pair of learners were assigned different viewpoints on an issue and were asked to defend their positions</p>	<p>She predicted that problem-solving tasks would generate more negotiation than debates</p>	<p>Total number of words</p> <p>Number of turns</p> <p>Words per turn</p> <p>Number of C-Units</p> <p>Number of words per C-Unit</p> <p>S-Nodes per C-Unit for syntactic complexity</p> <p>Interactional moves</p>	<p>Convergent tasks generated more frequent turn-taking but shorter and less syntactically complex turns than debates. Convergent tasks also generated more interactional moves such as referential questions or comprehension checks.</p>

Sections 3.3.5, 3.3.6, and 3.3.7 will make more references to the processes of language production, attention, and memory, although interactional aspects will be occasionally mentioned, too.

3.3.4 Classification of task types based on interactive conditions

A number of attempts have been made to classify tasks into types according to their interactive conditions. One attempt at classifying task types was advanced by Pica et al. (1993), who proposed it from an interactionist perspective. Their taxonomy is based on the features that were seen in the previous sections: information flow, requirement to share information, the convergence or divergence of goals, and the number of possible outcomes. In jigsaw tasks a part of the information is held by the two or more participants; all of the parts of the information are required to complete the tasks; all the members work towards a convergent goal; and only one solution or outcome is possible. For example, a narrative reconstruction task in which each member in a pair has a number of mixed-up vignettes that, together, make up a story. Information-gap tasks are like jigsaw ones. The goal is to share information, only that usually all the information is possessed by one of the members, and it therefore flows in one direction only. It can potentially be made two-way, too. An example would be a map task in which one member has an empty map and the other one has to provide directions from a route-marked map. In problem solving tasks, information usually flows in two

directions; information sharing is not absolutely required, although all the members in a dyad or group work towards the same goal; and only one solution is possible. For instance, the traditional 'desert island' task, in which a group of learners must decide on a limited number of objects to take to the island from a closed list. In decision-making tasks, information flows in two ways; interaction is not absolutely required, interactants work towards the same goal; and one or more solutions are possible. For example, a task in which learners have a closed set of candidates for a scholarship. Learners must consider their personality and decide who the best candidate would be. Finally, in opinion exchange tasks information flows two ways; it is not required for all members to engage in interaction; they do not work necessarily towards the same goal; and a variety of solutions are possible. This would correspond to an open debate in class.

It should be pointed out, however, that the types advanced by Pica et al. (1993) are not discrete categories and therefore a lot of the features overlap since, for example, a jigsaw task can in fact be a decision-making task. Beyond that, their classification is almost exclusively based on interactive factors and do not contemplate other task features which would have to be incorporated if the taxonomy were to be complete. It is to other types of non-interactive features that we now turn.

3.3.5 Task familiarity

It is important to note that task familiarity has been interpreted from different points of view and in slightly different ways. By task familiarity, Foster and Skehan (1996, p. 311) meant the general conditions under which a task is performed. They showed that being familiar with task type does not lead to improved performance. In his study on task complexity, Robinson (2001a) interpreted familiarity in terms of content (familiarity with a route marked in a map) and differentiated his experimental map tasks according to whether learners were familiar or unfamiliar with the area they were supposed to describe. Finally, Bygate (1999) also talks about tasks as triggering different more or less familiar language patterns or discourse genres. Hence, task familiarity can be interpreted as referring to the task type, task topic, or task discourse genre.

From an interactionist, negotiation-of-meaning perspective, Plough and Gass (1993) compared the performance of two groups, one of which was familiar with a particular task type and one that was not. The tasks used in the study were an information-gap task (Spot the difference) and a consensus-type task (Who will survive). They predicted that familiarity would cause more negotiation of meaning than non-familiarity with tasks. Clarification requests, confirmation checks, back channel cues, overlaps and interruptions, and sentence completion episodes were counted. Although they did not obtain strong empirical support for their claims, they found that the task-familiar group used more clarification requests and

confirmation checks. Their interpretation was that task familiarity fosters a non-threatening environment that encourages learners to negotiate meaning. They also found, however, that the task-unfamiliar group was more highly involved in the task completion process as shown by the number of interruptions. They concluded that novelty of task type may encourage higher involvement. This was not confirmed by Foster and Skehan (1996), who showed that familiarity with the task, understood as familiarity with general task conditions, does not lead to improved performance.

Bygate (1999) interprets task familiarity as the unchanged context in which tasks can take place, and his research deals with the effects of task repetition. His interest lies in the integration of the different dimensions of performance (i.e. accuracy, fluency, and complexity) into communicative practice. He acknowledges that some tasks may focus the learner's attention more on lexis than on syntax, or the contrary, because different tasks generate different patterns of language. In his view, repetition or familiarity with the task helps develop this process of integration. Bygate (1999, p. 41) provides an example of how the same task repeated a few days later triggers more accurate and complex language. The explanation he provides is that familiarity gives learners "the time and awareness to shift attention from message content to the selection and monitoring of appropriate language." He, in fact, draws on Levelt's model of production to justify the claim that the first time a task is performed, because the cognitive load is high, the focus is on conceptualization. When the same task is performed for the second time, cognitive

resources are freed up, and the focus is on formulation and articulation, leading to greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Bygate has shown that learners' performance benefits more from task repetition than from practice of the same task type.

Pursuing similar objectives to the ones in his 1999 study, Bygate (2001) also studied the effects on performance of repeating the same task and practicing the same task type. He used an interview and a narrative task. One group practiced the interview task and the other group the narrative task over a period of 10 weeks. At the end of this period, each group repeated the same task they had performed at the beginning of the study and performed one new task of each type, yielding a total of 6 tasks. He hypothesized that more cognitively complex task (i.e. the narrative task) would trigger more complex but less fluent and accurate language. He also hypothesized that repeating the same task would yield better results in the three dimensions of speech and, also, that practicing one task type would have beneficial effects on a new version of the specific task type. As a measure of fluency he calculated the number of unfilled pauses for T-units, the number of errors per T-units for accuracy, and the number of words per T-unit for complexity. He found that both repeating the same task after 10 weeks and doing the same task type that was practiced for 10 weeks had significant positive effects on complexity and fluency, but they only showed a trend in the case of accuracy. He found very limited evidence of trade-off effects among the three dimensions. Contrary to his predictions, he found that learners were less fluent and less complex when

performing the narrative task than the interview task. He deduced that the interactive nature of the interview task may have led learners to produce more complex language. Finally, Bygate concluded that task repetition had a strong effect on performance, especially for accuracy and fluency because it frees up cognitive load. In contrast to previous findings such as the ones by Foster and Skehan (1996) that suggested that task familiarity, understood as the general task conditions in which the task takes place, did not lead to improved performance, Bygate found that task type practice also has positive effects on learners' performance, improving their 'discourse competence'.

Springing from his interest in the cognitive complexity of tasks, Robinson (2001) operationalized the +/- prior knowledge variable as being familiar or not with a route marked in map. In the two one-way, information-gap tasks he used for his study, the simple one had few elements, and learners were familiar with the route; whereas, in the complex version there were more elements, and learners were unfamiliar with the route. Because tasks were controlled for both variables, his results did not reflect whether it was the number of elements or the familiarity with the route, or a combination of both, that had specific effects on learners' production. His general findings will be explained in the next section.

3.3.6 +/- Elements

Robinson (2001a) operationalized the concept of task complexity in one of the few studies that combined two variables, familiarity and the number of elements, simultaneously. Robinson (2001a) operationalized the variable +/- elements by using an interactive one-way map task with which one student was to give directions to another student who had to draw a route on an empty map. The simple version included few elements and references of a small area which was also known to the students, while the complex map consisted of a large area with many elements and that was unknown to the students. He hypothesized that the most complex version of the task would trigger less fluent but more accurate and complex language. He also predicted enhanced interaction for the complex task. His measures of lexical complexity included the ratio of types to tokens, the number of words per C-unit, the number of error free C-units, as well as interactive measures like clarification requests and comprehension checks. He found that the more complex version of tasks generated significantly higher lexical complexity (i.e. lower type-token ratios) as well as significantly lower fluency, with a significant lower number of words per C-unit. Accuracy did not reflect any effects of complexity on performance and neither did complexity. In Robinson's view, the interactive nature of the task, with many overlaps and interruptions, may have mitigated learners' attempts at using structurally complex language. From the interactive point of view, he found a significant higher number of comprehension checks and a strong trend for more

clarification requests in the complex version. In this study, Robinson also used a 9-point Likert scale to measure learners' responses to an affective variable questionnaire. The five items included in the questionnaire, which were presented as dichotomies in the questions, were difficulty (easy/difficult), stress (frustrated/relaxed), confidence (poorly done/well done), interest (not interesting/interesting), and motivation (not motivating/motivating). Robinson found that his operationalization of complexity corresponded to learners' perception of difficulty. Although more complex tasks were perceived as more difficult, stressful, and triggered a lower perception of confidence, there were no differences between levels of task complexity in terms of interest or motivation. Finally, the calculation of correlations between production variables and affective variable showed that fluency correlated with learners' perception of ability to complete the task in both simple and complex versions (See Table 15 on the following page for a summary of information-processing features).

Table 15.

Studies, task types, operationalization, hypotheses, measurements, and general findings related to information-processing features.

Information-processing features	Studies	Task types	Operationalization	Hypotheses	Measurements	General findings
+/- familiarity	Plough and Gass (1993)	Information-gap task. Consensus-type task.	One of the task types was previously performed by one of the groups.	They predicted that task familiarity would generate more negotiation of meaning episodes.	Clarification requests Confirmation checks Back channel cues Overlaps and interruptions Sentence completion episodes	The task-familiar group used a higher number of clarification requests and confirmation checks. Task familiarity was said to foster a non-threatening environment that encourages negotiation of meaning.
	Bygate (2001)	Interview task. Narrative task.	Each group practiced either the interview task or the narrative task for a period of 10 weeks. Then they repeated the task they had performed originally.	He hypothesized that both task repetition and task-type familiarity would enhance fluency, accuracy, and complexity.	Unfilled pauses per T-units for fluency. Number of errors per T-units for accuracy. The number of words per T-units for complexity	Task repetition has a strong effect on performance especially in the areas of accuracy and fluency. Task familiarity was also found to have positive effects on learners' performance.
+/- elements	Robinson (2001)	One-way map task.	The simple version was a route marked map with few elements and references of an area which learners were familiar with. The complex version was a route unmarked map with many elements and references of an area that was unfamiliar to students.	He hypothesized that the most complex version of the task would trigger less fluent but more accurate and complex language as well as enhanced interaction for more complex tasks.	Fluency measured by the number of words per C-unit. Lexical complexity by the ratio of types to tokens. Structural complexity by the number of clauses per C-unit Accuracy by the number of error-free units	The more complex version of tasks generated significantly higher lexical complexity and lower fluency, with no difference in accuracy or structural complexity.

3.3.7 Other task features

There are other task features that have been investigated and that will be briefly mentioned here. Pica and Doughty (1985) and Long (1990) compared different arrangements in pair and group work arrangements. Their overall conclusion was that group work provides more opportunities for negotiation of meaning, since in such context the quantity and quality of input (as well as of output) increases. Doughty and Pica (1986) investigated required versus optional information exchange with the general finding that required information tasks generated more negotiation and more repetition. Pica and Doughty (1988) and Newton and Kennedy (1996) investigated split versus shared information tasks, with the general finding that shared information tasks produce more negotiation of meaning, in the case of the former researchers, and more complex language in the case of the latter pair of researchers. Regarding the comparison of native speaker/non-native speaker (NS-NNS) and non-native speaker/non-native speaker (NSS-NSS), Gass and Varonis (1985) suggested that NNS-NNS pairs offer NNSs the opportunity to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output through negotiation to a greater extent than its counterpart. Finally, Niwa (2000), cited in Robinson (forthcoming), operationalized the variables of +/- dual task performance and +/- reasoning demands, two dimensions of cognitive complexity. She found performance to be related to individual differences.

By looking at how the manipulation of different task features affects production, the second question that was asked at the beginning of this chapter has been dealt with. The features of +/- Planning Time and +/-Here-and-Now will be specifically dealt with in Chapter III.

3.4 Summary of Chapter III

Chapter III has dealt with language production in the context of L2 syllabus construction and instruction. The chapter began with the description of a number of options for syllabus design which are dependent on different approaches to language teaching. We saw how synthetic syllabi are organized around grammatical units, lexical units, notions and functions, or skills. We discussed some of its problems among which their lack of coherence with SLA findings was highlighted. Analytic syllabi with an exclusive focus on meaning were then described, and the lack of focus of form in their implementation was emphasized as their major drawback. Finally, three other types of analytic syllabi were outlined. Process syllabi were defined as syllabi in which each task as well as most other aspects of the program are negotiated with learners. The procedural syllabus was presented as one of the first approximations to a syllabus composed in its entirety by tasks. Finally, the task-based proposals advanced by Long (1985) and Skehan (1998; 2001) were outlined.

The second part of the chapter summarized the research on task features that has taken place in the last two decades. From an interactionist perspective, tasks have been manipulated along the flow of information (one-way versus two-way), the number of solutions that can be reached, and the convergence or divergence of their goals. We saw that such research has been interested in how task manipulation, as measured by the quantity and quality of interactional moves, can lead to acquisition. From an information-processing perspective, research on the dimensions of task familiarity and the degree of complexity along the number of elements were outlined, and a number of other task variables briefly mentioned.

In the next chapter, the research on the specific information-processing task variables involved in this study will be extensively reviewed, and the questions and hypotheses for the experiment will be presented.