SLA as Pieces of Puzzle in Syllabus Design and Materials Development

Mehdi Shokouhi

Department of English, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Mohammad Rajabpour Ahmadi

MA of TEFL, Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Amol, Iran

Elham Astanei

MA of TEFL, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Abstract

First of all, the link between the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and curriculum development and more scrupulously syllabus design at the level of materials development is an issue which can neither be associated to any definite theory of SLA in general nor to an exact scholarly feature in particular. Special thanks to SLA scholars, it seems that all of the SLA researchers are at consensus that providing content materials for second language (L2) learners to triumph over their L2 mastery of their language is reasonably enough a prodigious and a herculean task. Therefore, each of the SLA scholars tries to rationalize their theory in relation to the materials development and consequently take away the criticism or the praise of the other critiques in that the credibility of the SLA theories has permanently been under an unanswered and enigmatic query, let alone giving false hopes to investigate their applicability in curriculum development and materials development. As a result, the present paper focuses on the following two basic and leading questions. The former investigates whether SLA has the capability of being used as a resource of the materials development, and if yes in what ways. And the latter sheds light on the unique feature of SLA which acts as the basis of materials development which is called 'unit of analysis'.

Keywords: second language acquisition, unit of analysis, materials development, syllabus design

SLA: UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

For now, let's take up the question of the relevancy of the SLA theory and materials development to see whether SLA is related to materials development whatsoever, and consequently the second question of in what ways and how. Although the question of

the relevancy of SLA research and materials development is an intuitively self-rhetorical taken-for-granted answered question, it is worthy to see the point in scrutiny. In fact, what SLA theories provide to be applied in materials development is not a rationalized view of the language both at level of theory of learning or theory of language; rather it is a yardstick, it is a standard, or an index which somehow eases the complexity of a phenomenon such as language and the more complex phenomenon of language learning and more realistically a complicated, intricate phenomenon of curriculum development and materials development.

But what is exactly a unit of analysis? According to Robinson (1998), syllabus design is based essentially on a decision about the 'units' of classroom activity, and the 'sequence' in which they are to be performed. Robinson highlights that there are options in the units to be adopted. Units can be based on an analysis of the *language* to be learned, in terms of grammatical structures of lexical items and collocations. Units may also be based on an analysis of the components of *skilled behaviour* in the second language, for example the reading micro-skills. Units may also be holistic *performative acts*, such as serving meals on an airplane or finding a journal article in a library using library technology. They may be either generic, or based on needs analyses of specific groups of learners.

SLA: CHOICES IN SEQUENCE AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

But there is a question here, if all of the SLA research stipulate their share in curriculum development and syllabus design by providing a yardstick, a standard, and overall with a unit of analysis on which materials are constructed accordingly, so what would be the distinguishing factor?!

The answer to this question for sure resides in Breen (1984) and Candlin (1984). Breen (1984) stresses that along with choices in the units to be adopted; there are choices in the 'sequence' in which they can be presented. A syllabus can consist of a *prospective* and fixed decision about what to teach, and in what order. In this case the syllabus will be a definition of the contents of classroom activity. A sequencing decision can also be made *on-line*, during classroom activity. In this case the initial syllabus will only guide, but not constrain the classroom activities.

Additionally, Candlin (1984) underlines that a syllabus can be *retrospective*, in which, no syllabus will emerge until after the course of instruction. In this case the syllabus functions only as a record of what was done, imposing no controlling constraint on the classroom negotiation of content.

Considering the two notions of unit of analysis put forward by Robinson (1998) and choices in sequence put forward by Breen (1984) and Candlin (1984) under the rubrics of prospective and retrospective which can be considered as the two significant elements of any syllabus design and materials development agenda, let's see which of the SLA theorists has more dexterity to play a better music and quench the materials development desire of providing better materials for second language users. More

importantly, providing all the SLA scholars' theories contribution to materials development is definitely an issue beyond the scope of this paper. As a result, the most important scholars and theories are explored throughout this paper among which is Vivian Cook from a nativist paradigm, Rod Ellis form a cognitivist paradigm, Michael Long, along with Peter Skehan and Peter Robinson from an interactionist paradigm and finally discussing Modular On-line Growth and Use of Language (MOGUL) form Generative linguistic paradigm.

VIVIAN COOK

Indeed Cook, in his works, i.e. Cook (1998, 1999a, 1999b, and 2002) has been quite successful portraying L2 learners, by which emergence of Cook (2008) is definitely a resourceful book to see how L2 should be realized accordingly. Having read all these works in details would be an unjustified claim. However, exploring the sequence which results in overall view of Cook's contribution is a claim which the presenter strongly advocates.

According to Cook (1998), in spite of the fact that a small number of L2 users can identify with natives, we need to be concerned about the majority of learners who do not. In other words, L2 users must be compared to successful L2 users, not monolingual native speakers. Indeed, multi-competent multilinguals outnumber monolinguals worldwide. According to Cook (1999), L2 users must not be judged by the norms established within a native community but by those who are competence enough to use two languages effectively in that

The native speaker comparison may be interesting and convenient but is useful only up to the point at which it starts to deny the special nature of people who know more than one language. (p.13).

Then, considering Cooks theory and its relation to the curriculum and materials development, it has then to be developed around the portraits of L2 users rather than those of native speakers. According to Cook (2002), at present it may be easier to say than to carry out the task because accounts of proficient L2 users in their own terms are hard to be given. Although, practically speaking, as highlighted by Cook (1998) "it may be possible to apply it, say, to a beginners level and to incorporate in the coursebook examples of L2 users using the language appropriately as well as situations based on native use" (p.13).

Additionally, Cook (1998) claims that the L1 is always present in the students' minds at some level. Cook believes that L2 users are not speakers of one language but two; they have more than one language system in their minds, related in many ways at different levels. However, many SLA researchers have considered L2 as independent of L1. In contrast, Cook (2002) stresses that the L2 user has a mind that is uniquely different from a monolingual, in many ways other than language.

Considering the aforementioned issue of presence of L1 in L2 users mind put forward Cook, the course book should never cut the students from their L1, nor should they

relate the L1 to the L2. As a result, drawing on Jacobsen and Faltis (1990), Cook (2002) insists that wherever possible, we can utilize code-switching activities that require the students to use more than one language. Moreover, EFL course books can devise exercises in which learners make comparisons between languages and decide whether the L1 and L2 are similar.

Moreover, Cook (1998) also considers the issue of individual differences and their effects on SLA and their implications for materials development as well. According to Cook (1998), individual differences affect language learners' ability to become bilingual because learners deal with aspects of L2 learning differently as there are differences between L2 learners. Drawing on Gardner (1985), Dornyei (1990) and Oxford (1990), Cook (1998) highlights that learners differ in the type of motivations they have, whether the integrative or instrumental motivations (and in the need for achievement and also in their choice of strategies.

As a result, Cook (1988) clearly states that curriculum and materials not only must be adapted to the average characteristics of a certain group in terms of motivation, age, sex and so on, but also should attend to the traits varying between individuals, such as cognitive styles and personality factors. Thus, it seems to be sound and reasonable for the materials to be developed in way that allows alternatives for the student in terms of cognitive styles and choices on strategy.

ROD ELLIS

The next person which SLA finds itself in debt with is Rod Ellis. For the very first issue, it has to be highlighted that Rod Ellis's research considering SLA and its contribution to the materials development is recognized under what has been called let's say *Ellis's structural syllabus* though not being mistaken by the so called structurlist proposal of the vies of language.

Ellis (1993, 1994) draws extensively on SLA research and theory to motivate his arguments for a role for a structural syllabus. Ellis' argument rests on two distinctions: between explicit conscious knowledge and implicit tacit knowledge and between declarative knowledge of facts and procedural knowledge of how to do things. Ellis argues that explicit, declarative knowledge of L2 grammar can influence the development of implicit declarative knowledge, and that, through communicative activity, implicit declarative knowledge can be proceduralised and used in spontaneous skilled performance.

More significantly, considering the two aforementioned yardsticks of unit of analysis and choices in sequence, it seems that the latter is more palpable and eye-catching in Ellis's structural syllabus in that Ellis (1989) emphasizes that the main condition is that the learner must be developmentally ready to incorporate the explicit grammar instruction into their interlanguage and if grammatical instruction is not timed to the learner's point of development it will not influence the developing implicit knowledge base.

Therefore, considering Ellis's research on SLA with regard to notions of explicit conscious knowledge and implicit tacit knowledge on one side and declarative knowledge of facts and procedural knowledge of how to do thing on the other, it seems that classroom activities and in effect course book materials should be in a way to vacillate around these terms. As a result, Ellis and Noboyushi (1993) and Fotos and Ellis (1991), find task an effective and eligible device to promote consciousness-raising, and noticing of target grammar rules.

However, Ellis (2003) provides a more meticulous and fastidious account of the defining what he means by tasks which entails Ellis to move from his so-called structural syllabus to a more updated version of his ideas to be introduced in terms of task primarily focusing on meaning but still highlighting his original proposal of the unit of analysis of language i.e., target language grammar and more specifically that of consciousness-raising task. What's more talking of task in Ellis's structural syllabus should not be mistaken with task-based syllabus, which will be considered flowingly. Therefore, content of the course book considering materials development in terms content and more specifically from Ellis's structural syllabus point of view, should be full of opportunities to engage learners acquiring conscious knowledge of language.

PETER SKEHAN AND PETER ROBINSON

The next person who has provided 2 decades fruitful analysis of SLA is Michael Long along with Peter Skehan and Peter Robinson whose works, considering materials development, has emerged in what has been called the task-based syllabus. First of all, considering materials development based on task-based syllabus which has been outlined by Long (1997) and Long and Crookes, (1992), it has to be mention that in many discussions of tasks, and examples of what claim to be task-based materials, tasks are used to practice a particular structure, function or sub-skill. These include the tasks advocated by Ellis (1993), where the use of tasks to direct attention to grammatical form is theoretically motivated and an explicit part of the rationale for their use.

According to Robinson (1998), these are called structure-trapping tasks the organizing principle of these course books, apparent from the syllabus descriptions at the front, are grammatical structures, listening microskills, functions, topics. However, in contrast to structure-trapping tasks, tasks in task based syllabus are purely meaningful activities and do not implement a covert grammatical or lexical syllabus. More clearly and plainly, considering the unit of analysis, tasks alone are the units of materials development not the grammatical structures as in case of Ellis's structural syllabus.

But why scholars such as Michael Long, Graham Crookes, and Peter Robinson are not in harmony with Rod Ellis in accepting the grammatical structures as the unit of analysis considering materials development? The answer resides in the following three reasons by which the overall result of accepting grammatical structures as the unit of analysis in materials development has been emerged.

First, according to Lightbown and Spada (1990), there is a little resemblance between acquisitional sequences and instructional sequences based on linguistic forms. Second, learning is non-linear and cumulative, which is a phenomenon known as U-shaped behaviour, rather than linear and additive as synthetic language syllabuses which Ellis's Structural syllabus is of a type. And third, according to Pienemann (1989), is the research showing the influence of learnability on the order in which items can be learned, which is an issue not considered in Ellis's structural syllabus. Additionally, Long (1997) point out that linguistic grading, as required by many synthetic structural approaches results in classroom language and texts which are artificial prohibiting exposure to language which learners may be ready to learn.

But what is the implication of the task-based syllabus for the classroom materials development. Considering the implications, first, one has to clearly stipulate his advocacy of the scholars with whom he is in line with. For sure the view of Michael Long being brought op in an interactionist school is quite different with that of Peter Skehan who is more cognitively oriented in that the Long (1997) places great importance on the opportunities to focus on form in the context of meaningful interaction that task work provides, in line with his 'interactionist' theory of L2 development while Skehan (1996) takes a more cognitive, information processing approach to task-based instruction. Moreover, Skehan (1997) has steadily pursued a research agenda aimed at identifying the effects of factors such as planning time on the complexity, accuracy and fluency of learner production.

But what is quite obvious is that like Long, Skehan (1996) rejects linguistic grading as a criterion for task and syllabus design and defines a task as an activity in which meaning is primary. In sum, as the major principles of task-based syllabus and more specifically the views of the task as the unit of materials development proposed by Long and Skehan entail, the materials should be that of focusing on meaning and fostering fluency and accuracy.

More importantly, according to Robinson (1995, 1997) research into the criteria of determining task sequencing, which according to Breen (1984) and Candlin (1984) is the second element that should be considered in materials development after defining the unit of analysis, suggest that one way is to identify cognitive dimensions of the difficulty of tasks, and to assess the effects of tasks performed at easy and complex ends of each dimension in that easier tasks tend to result in more fluent speech, since cognitive and processing demands are low and more complex tasks force learners to attend to the language used on task, resulting in less fluent but more complex and accurate production. Thus tasks can foster fluency and accuracy.

In effect, considering the materials development, it all depends on what a designer looks for. Driving at fluency, it has to be considered through a task which is cognitively less demanding and seeking accuracy, one can make a task more demanding by exercising more cognitive processes for a task to be carried out. Although, there are many other factors by which a task can be sequenced. For a more thoroughgoing discussion see Ellis (2003, Chapter 7, pp. 220-229).

MODULAR ON-LINE GROWTH AND USE OF LANGUAGE (MOGUL)

Finally, is it really possible to close this paper without recognizing the share of Generative school of linguistics put forward by Noam Chomsky or let's say generative SLA considering classroom activities and materials development. For sure the answer is a qualified NO. As the representative of generative school, The Modular On-line Growth and Use of Language (MOGUL) framework is considered with its implication for classroom materials development.

For one case (MOGUL) framework adheres to the claim of modularity of mind put forward by Fodor (1983) which holds that there is a core of linguistic knowledge that is epistemologically distinct from other kinds of knowledge. MOGUL also accepts Jackendoff's (1997) version of the mind in which there are linguistic sub-modules which process formal aspects of language, phonology and syntax.

One of the most concerns in MOGUL framework is how the distinction between linguistic vs. extra-linguistic knowledge on the one hand, and linguistic vs. metalinguistic knowledge on the other, are of use to language pedagogy. Arguably, this is where a reductionist approach is useful. According to Sharwood-Smith and Truscott (2005), given the complexity of language, the practice of systematic categorization remains useful for breaking language down into distinct, but related components in order to be better able to discuss, understand and teach/learn it. Consequently, teachers who are aware of the ways in which language can be carved up are in a much better position to teach those aspects of language that are most suitable for the particular students in their classroom than those who are picking and choosing language points at random.

Additionally, Truscott and Sharwood Smith (2004) highlight Acquisition by Processing Theory, whereby language growth occurs through the on-line use of language. With Acquisition by Processing Theory, learning occurs through the reinforcement of input. When, for example, a new lexical item occurs in the input, it registers in the learner's mind. As that item receives reinforcement, it will have a higher resting activation level which in time may qualify it as a permanent part of the knowledge store and if a particular point of input is never encountered again, it is not likely to achieve a high resting activation level and may never become a stable part of the accessible knowledge store.

But what is the implication of MOGUL considering the materials development. As it is highlighted by Sharwood-Smith (2004), in all generative frameworks, language is a mental process in which the brain functions by responding to external stimuli. One literal implication of this would be for teachers to view their role as needing to stimulate the students sitting in their classrooms through plenty of examples, and the repetition of examples, to allow mental structures to develop. Accordingly, such a repetition can also be recognized via input-enrichment considering materials development.

The next use of MOGUL is a consideration of focus of form and genre analysis as the unit of analysis and choices in sequence considering materials development. According to Truscott and Sharwood-Smith (2011), Within MOGUL, the effectiveness of Focus on Form depends on the extent to which it primes the learner. The learner constructs an understanding of a particular text, whether written or spoken by drawing from existing stores of knowledge. As part of this process of making sense of the language, relevant linguistic knowledge will also be activated. In this way, the learner is primed for explicit explanation about relevant points of language. This explicit awareness can be stored as meta-linguistic knowledge alongside any modular knowledge that might have also been implicitly reinforced. More importantly, Truscott and Sharwood-Smith (2011) assert that focus on Form provides a natural complement to the genre approach. In addition to genre-specific text structures, conventions and terminology, more structural elements of syntax can be highlighted and explicitly taught.

This can provide a comprehensive approach to language teaching and a more comprehensive approach to materials development. The genre approach will guide the teacher to teach language through existing texts, whether written or spoken, that exemplify the use of language particular discourse communities. Therefore, by using authentic texts considering materials development, the learner is receiving natural input and the features of that text, in terms of register, specialized vocabulary, etc, which can be explicitly highlighted. Finally, within MOGUL, we can maintain the idea that authentic input leads to modular language acquisition and in effect, considering materials development, provide the learners with as many as possible authentic texts in their course book materials.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have seen that how theories of SLA in general and SLA scholars in particular have done their outmost to provide the SLA course book and syllabus designers with a qualified and effective yardstick known as the unit of analysis. Through his idea of multi-competence, Vivian Cook finds the portrait of the L2 users as an eligible unit of analysis around which materials have to be developed. Meanwhile, the same unit of analysis seems to be the grammatical structures being applied through tasks in Ellis's structural syllabus. However, Michael Long along with Peter Skehan and Peter Robinson underline that the main unit of analysis is the task itself which primarily meaning-oriented.

SLA research can be used in the curriculum development, syllabus design and writing teaching materials (Tomlinson, 1998). Surprisingly, "SLA's influences on course books are hard to find. Perhaps because they are not readily visible, perhaps because they are not there" (Cook, 1998, p.11).

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