Textbook and Present-Day Requirements for Course Design

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"A person educated in a certain language, as opposed to one who is trained only in its use for a restricted set of predictable situations, is someone who is able to relate what he or she knows to circumstances other than those which attended the acquisition of that knowledge…. Education seeks to provide for creativity whereby what is learned is a set of schemata and procedures for adapting them to cope with problems which do not have a ready-made formulaic solution."

(Willis, Garton 1996)

This statement could serve as guidance towards the accomplishment of the signposts of contemporary language course design. For, today course design stands out as a comprehensive, multi-layer and multi-functional systematic process, as well as structure, that strives to incorporate multiple components, the ultimate goal of which is to enable the learner with the capacity of "meaning potential" (Halliday 2007). Within the framework of an article we shall try to refer to the issues that are essential in gearing the language course design towards its present-day requirements.

It is common knowledge that in describing a language course five basic components of it should be examined: (a) the existing curriculum and syllabus, (b) the materials in use, (c) the teacher staff, (d) the learners and (e) the resources of the programme. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these a better programme can be developed, which will ideally describe:

1. *what* the learners are expected to know at the end of the course;
2. *what* is to be taught and learnt during the course;
3. *when* it is to be taught and *at what rate* of progress, relating the items to the different levels and stages as well as to the time constraints of the course;
4. *how it is to be taught*, suggesting procedures, techniques and materials;
5. *how it is to be evaluated*, suggesting testing and evaluation mechanisms.   (Richards, Rodgers 2001)

A detailed analysis of the mentioned issues naturally presupposes certain changes aimed at the improvement or restructuring or a more fundamental renewal of a course design. However, the above mentioned features are put and viewed in a bigger picture that directly influences and moulds the final results. This picture is col-

lated from the major factors that contribute to changes in the course design. They are actually:

a. Linguistic theories and learning theories – the beliefs about the language learning process;
b. The political, economic and social changes: these factors can and do stimulate changes in language course design as well. A recent example is the changes brought in the field about after the collapse of the Soviet Union;
c. Pedagogic experience - a crucial factor;
d. Technological advances that dynamically contribute to the change in educational views and practices.

In the given panorama, however, the main carrier of the comprehensive load of the language course design, incorporating and reflecting different theories, political, economic and social changes, language teaching components, etc. has been and still is the textbook – a key component to most language programmes. It is doubtless that despite the impact of new technologies, textbooks continue to play an important role in language teaching, providing a useful resource for both teachers and learners. "The truth of the matter is that the textbook is still seen as central to teaching and learning by the majority of teachers in most, if not all national educational systems" (Robinson 1991).

Among the principal advantages that single out textbooks as such, the following features stand out:

a. Textbooks provide structure and a syllabus for the program. Without a textbook a program may not have a central core, and learners may not receive a syllabus that has been systematically planned and developed.
b. Textbooks help to standardize instruction. The use of a textbook can nsure that the students in different classes receive similar content and therefore can be tested in a similar way.
c. Textbooks maintain quality. With a well-developed textbook, students are exposed to materials that have been tried and tested, that are based on sound learning principles and paced appropriately.
d. Textbooks provide variety of learning resources (When accompanied with workbooks, CDs and DVDs, comprehensive teaching guides, textbooks provide a rich and varied resource for teachers and learners);
e. Textbooks are efficient. They save teachers' time, enabling them to devote their professional time to teaching rather than materials development.

Textbooks may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught and the kind of language practice the students take part in. For learners, the textbook may provide the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher. In the case of inexperienced teachers, textbooks may also serve as a form of teacher training – they provide ideas on how to plan and teach lessons, as well as formats that teachers can use (White 1998).

The spread of English as a global language of communication and almost simultaneous advance of information and communication technologies have created a worldwide demand for up-to-date and user-friendly teaching materials. Meanwhile, the

legacy of textbook design culture that has been inherited from the Soviet times leaves much to desire. During the 70 years of the Soviet regime and the iron curtain, the foreign language teaching approach was predominantly translational as**:**

- Few specialists were allowed to travel abroad (with Russian as the intrastate language).
- To every person communicating with foreigners, be it abroad or at home, an interpreter was attached (usually an intelligence service agent).
- There was lack of proper telecommunication system to establish direct contact with colleagues overseas, to retrieve information, to present personal attitudes or opinions, to participate in video-conferences, discussions or debates.

With the advent of independence a new reality has emerged. Independent states imply independent, direct contacts with the outer world in all spheres: security, economy, science, culture, everyday life. Competence and a good command of foreign languages has become a must. And in that chain of development and consequences, course design and textbooks, too, have started to undergo changes in order to meet the contemporary standards and requirements of foreign language teaching. Hence, a need for an abrupt shift towards incorporating student-centered methodologies and, correspondingly, a need to adhere to more holistic design principle has emerged. Respectively, diverse approaches to the choice of material have come to the fore. Each of these, on their own, presents a vast field of research and deliberation. However, we shall confine ourselves to referring to some characteristics only.

Firstly, **the design principles to follow**: these are clarity, continuity, flexibility, progression, simplicity, naturalness, fun, repetition and variety, originality, usefulness, humour, physical activity and real life projection.

Secondly, **the input**: second language acquisition theories today pay a special emphasis on the importance of input (Krashen 1985), particularly on giving the learner the ability to establish a connection between form and meaning. Learners should be exposed to an abundance of good input and be given ample opportunities to process it for form and meaning. The majority of modern language textbooks that claim to follow the student-centered communicative approach include a balance of form-focused and meaning-focused activities. They provide not only knowledge of the structures and forms of the language, but also the functions and purposes that a language serves in different communicative settings.

The major inventory tools applied in textbook design are grouped into three headings: notions and grammar, themes and topics, socio-cultural functions. The combination of these can be considered a final objective of material design. It can be called the provision of the focus. Every well-constructed language unit or lesson in the textbook requires a focus, a point of concentration which the writers select. "Textbook design involves the development of not only the tasks, but of whole units, which must fit together seamlessly in order to reflect a coherent end product" (Atkinson 2007).

In designing a unit, issues of **sequencing** and **grading** are of paramount importance. Linguistic and pedagogical principles determine the order in which items are presented. The internal grading of each unit (and among units) results in such an organisation of the

original format that teachers cannot change the order of units or skip some, without upsetting the careful grading which has been embedded in the sequence.

An indispensable component of sequencing and grading principle is the **cyclical format** of material design. It is an organizational principle which enables to work with the same topic more than once. Each time the particular one reappears; at a more complex or difficult level. The concept is that the new subject matter should not be introduced once and then dropped; rather it should be reintroduced in different manifestations at various times in the course.

Ideal materials, to cover the whole range of the required language skills, should present a stimulus at each point to move on, whether these skills are presented separately or are well integrated. The variety of **text types**, whether authentic or adapted for a different spread of purposes, might be very significant in exposing students to the types of text they will most probably encounter beyond and outside the course, as this covers the content and base for meaning-focused activities.

At the same time scientific grammar, which is the objective of theoretical linguistics, is translated into a **pedagogical grammar** before it can be used for material development. This pedagogical grammar takes into account the learning process, interference from the first/native language, as well as other relevant factors which bear on the acquisition of the new language (Stern 2003).

In this respect it is worth noting that purely mechanical drills, so common in grammar teaching before, are slowly being replaced by **meaningful and/or communicative drills.** On the other hand, numerous **workouts** in the form of warm-ups or relaxers, theatre games, group dynamics tasks, problem-solving tasks, etc., that are language learning and language using activities, enhance the learner's overall acquisition process.

Role-play takes up such names as "warm-up", "improvisation", "simulation", "social drama" and so on. Being one of the most productive means of language learning, it, nevertheless, requires the will and readiness of the students to go for it. "Having opted for playing the role of another, the writer must build in strong motivational factors so that the learner wants to be that other person. Language learners, after all, are not actors in training" (Dubin, Olshtain 1986).

Another characteristics of course design is the fact that at earlier stages or at lower levels, **the native language of the learner** is often used in textbooks as a functional asset to complement the assignments. "The first language of the learner is used as a useful aid when it is necessary for understanding or for formulating hypotheses about the target language, particularly in the early stages." (Ellis 1994) And at that, special attention to the correlation between the L1 competence and foreign language acquisition process is accentuated. "In defining course objectives we must consider the learner's proficiency and general development in their L1 at course entry: accordingly, expectations with respect to fluency in the target language and expectations concerning academic skills in the new language can be suited to the particular student population" (Odlin 1997).

Yet, another desirable component in course design is the introduction of **humour**, as it greatly facilitates language acquisition and implementation. This does not imply

a couple of jokes on the sidelines of the unit, but a lucid, witty attitude that can accompany the learner throughout different language tasks. Such a fusion is certainly painfully difficult to achieve. Much depends on the expertise and mould of the authors' team.

Finally, **the writing skills** section, in its turn, has been expanded to focus on its communicative goals. Introducing and elaborating materials teaching writing skills have undergone significant changes towards the practical, communicative format. Thus, in the writing tasks of the present-day course design learners have to answer to real ads in paper applications for jobs or write letters to their pen-pals, depending on their immediate needs for writing in the target language. In an academic course, learners write assignments appropriate to their particular field of specialization: conflict reports, library research reports, presentation drafts, etc. Writing is tied to the learners' real-life needs; writing a resume, a letter seeking a job interview, writing an abstract for a professional conference, etc.

In this way, the writing activity becomes an interactive process with focus on "when", "why" and "for what audience" it is performed. The objective of the activity has shifted towards communicating to the audience.

Student population is viewed as another significant factor. The designed course should allow students some degree of freedom in making use of the textbook. The textbook should give ample space and creative tasks for them to develop and take an active part in the learning process. Therefore a good course design and a good textbook is the one the tasks of which put students in situations where they must share responsibilities, make decisions, evaluate their own progress, develop individual preferences and the like. It implies that contemporary textbooks should bear heavy reliance on tasks that will involve students in team work and stimulate them to become initiators of activities.

To put in a nutshell, a good course-book will:

a. be appropriate to the context in which it is to be used, in terms of language and cultural content, length, grading and methodology;

b. offer choices to teachers and learners;

c. be valued by teachers and learners;

d. contain language which has real world relevance and is, wherever possible, drawn from authentic sources;

e. contain tasks and activities to motivate learners;

f. deal with topics which learners can identify with;

g. support learning outside the classroom (Bolitho 2005).

The process of textbook writing is a demanding job, with inevitable highs and lows. The design process includes: reviewing, feedback, expansion, planning, collaboration, finalizing, considering alternatives, problematizing, breaking, revising, piloting, rejecting ideas, switching focus, resource use, trying out ideas, recycling, changing minds and the routine (Dubin, Olshtain 1986).

In most cases, writing a textbook is a team effort. "Authors need to develop understanding of learning styles, of the principles of assessment, of different ways of dealing

with language points and of language pedagogy. On a personal level they will have to learn to work collaboratively, to accept and make criticism and to modify their principles in the light of feedback and experience. In short, writing is a route to professional development" (Bolitho 2005).

Team effort brings "who" questions into focus: Who takes the responsibility for organising the work? Who controls quality? Who takes care of the budget? Who speaks for the teacher's role? Who guards the learners' needs? Who negotiates with editors and publishers? Who deals with administrators? A good team should have a balance of interests. Some will work more effectively as originators or conceptualizers, some will be effective finishers while others will be best assigned as polishers or re-write specialists. In an effective team members at least complement each other.

The final step must be some form of evaluation of the work, some kind of monitoring in the forms of observation, feedback sessions, writing reports, reviews and students' reviews. The aim of the observation will be to see how teachers use textbooks and to find out how materials influence the quality of teaching and interaction that occurs in a lesson.

In general perspective, the overview of the present-day requirements of language course design covers a whole range of linguistic, psychological, as well as extra-linguistic factors which should be closely considered and incorporated in cohesive and systematic patterns when creating learner-friendly language teaching and learning media.

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Դասագիրքը օտար լեզվի դասընթացի կառուցմանն առաջադրված արդի պահանջների համատեքստում

Մեր օրերում օտար լեզվի դասընթացին առաջադրված պահանջները բազմարընույթ են՝ կախված հասարակության սոցիալ-քաղաքական և տնտեսական պայմաններից, գոյություն ունեցող լեզվաբանական և մանկավարժական տեսություններից, գիտատեխնիկական առաջընթացի ընձեռած հնարավորություններից և ժամանակակից սովորողի անհատական և հանրային կերտվածքից։ Համապատասխանաբար, սույն հոդվածում փորձ է արվում համադրել օտար լեզվի դասընթացը ձևավորող հիմնական բաղադրիչները, նպատակներն ու միջոցները՝ ընդգծելով դասագրքի դերն իբրև որոշիչ գործոն։ Անդրադարձ է կատարվում ուսանողակենտրոն, հատկապես հաղորդակցական հմտությունների ձևավորմանը նպաստող հանձնարարություններին, ինչպես նաև՝ դասընթացը մշակող հեղինակային խմբի աշխատանքի առանձնահատկություններին։