

# Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central, and Backward Design

RELC Journal  
44(1) 5–33  
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co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0033688212473293  
rel.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

The development and implementation of language teaching programs can be approached in several different ways, each of which has different implications for curriculum design. Three curriculum approaches are described and compared. Each differs with respect to when issues related to input, process, and outcomes, are addressed. Forward design starts with syllabus planning, moves to methodology, and is followed by assessment of learning outcomes. Resolving issues of syllabus content and sequencing are essential starting points with forward design, which has been the major tradition in language curriculum development. Central design begins with classroom processes and methodology. Issues of syllabus and learning outcomes are not specified in detail in advance and are addressed as the curriculum is implemented. Many of the 'innovative methods' of the 1980s and 90s reflect central design. Backward design starts from a specification of learning outcomes and decisions on methodology and syllabus are developed from the learning outcomes. The Common European Framework of Reference is a recent example of backward design. Examples will be given to suggest how the distinction between forward, central and backward design can clarify the nature of issues and trends that have emerged in language teaching in recent years.

## Keywords

Curriculum development, methods, methodology, assessment, syllabus design, course design, Common European framework

## Introduction

Language teaching has reflected a seemingly bewildering array of influences and directions in its recent history, some focusing on syllabus issues (e.g. corpus research), some

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reflecting new trends or proposals in methodology (e.g. task-based instruction), and some with a focus on learning targets (e.g. the Common European Framework). What is it that links diverse aspects of language teaching such as these and which similarly establishes connections between such aspects of teaching and learning as notional syllabuses, Content and Language Integrated Learning and the standards movement? This paper seeks to answer these questions by examining the assumptions and practices underlying three different curriculum design strategies that I will refer to as *forward design*, *central design*, and *backward design*. An understanding of the nature and implications of these design approaches is helpful in arriving at a ‘big picture’ understanding of some past and present trends in language teaching.

## Input, Process, Output and the Curriculum

The term *curriculum* is used here to refer to the overall plan or design for a course and how the content for a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved.

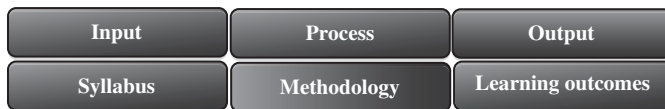
Curriculum takes content (from external standards and local goals) and shapes it into a plan for how to conduct effective teaching and learning. It is thus more than a list of topics and lists of key facts and skills (the “input”). It is a map of how to achieve the “outputs” of desired student performance, in which appropriate learning activities and assessments are suggested to make it more likely that students achieve the desired results (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006: 6).

In language teaching, *Input* refers to the linguistic content of a course. It seems logical to assume that before we can *teach* a language, we need to decide *what* linguistic content to teach. Once content has been selected it then needs to be organized into teachable and learnable units as well as arranged in a rational sequence. The result is a syllabus. There are many different conceptions of a language syllabus. Different approaches to syllabus design reflect different understandings of the nature of language and different views as to what the essential building blocks of language proficiency are, such as vocabulary, grammar, functions or text types. Criteria for the selection of syllabus units include frequency, usefulness, simplicity, learnability and authenticity. Once input has been determined, issues concerning teaching methods and the design of classroom activities and materials can be addressed. These belong to the domain of *process*.

*Process* refers to how teaching is carried out and constitutes the domain of methodology in language teaching. *Methodology* encompasses the types of learning activities, procedures and techniques that are employed by teachers when they teach and the principles that underlie the design of the activities and exercises in their textbooks and teaching resources. These procedures and principles relate to beliefs and theories concerning the nature of language and of second language learning and the roles of teachers, learners and instructional materials, and as ideas about language and language learning have changed, so too have the instructional practices associated with them. Throughout the twentieth century there was a movement away from mastery-oriented approaches focusing on the production of accurate samples of language use, to the use of more activity-oriented approaches focusing on interactive and communicative classroom processes.

Once a set of teaching processes has been standardized and fixed in terms of principles and associated practices it is generally referred to as a *method*, as in *Audiolingualism* or *Total Physical Response*.

*Output* refers to learning outcomes, that is, what learners are able to do as the result of a period of instruction. This might be a targeted level of achievement on a proficiency scale (such as the ACTFL Proficiency Scale) or on a standardized test such as TOEFL, the ability to engage in specific uses of language at a certain level of skill (such as being able to read texts of a certain kind with a specified level of comprehension), familiarity with the differences between two different grammatical items (such as the simple past and the present perfect), or the ability to participate effectively in certain communicative activities (such as using the telephone, taking part in a business meeting, or engaging in casual conversation). Language teaching since the late nineteenth century has seen a change in the intended outputs of learning – from knowledge-based to performance-based outputs. Hence while in Europe in the nineteenth century, foreign language learning was often promoted because of the mental discipline and intellectual development it was believed to develop in learners, in the twentieth century languages were taught for more practical goals. Today, desired learning outputs or outcomes are often described in terms of objectives or in terms of performance, competencies or skills. In simple form the components of curriculum and their relationship can be represented as follows:



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of a Curriculum

The pre-ambule above provides the backdrop to the core thesis of this paper:

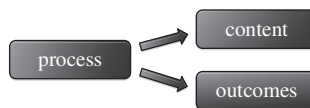
- ***Curriculum development in language teaching can start from input, process or output.***
- ***Each starting point reflects different assumptions about both the means and ends of teaching and learning.***

Conventional wisdom and practice tends to assume that decisions relating to input, process and output occur in sequence, each one dependent on what preceded it. Curriculum development from this perspective starts with a first-stage focus on input – when decisions about content and syllabus are made; moves on to a second-stage focus on methodology – when the syllabus is ‘enacted’, and then leads to a final-stage of consideration of output – when means are used to measure how effectively what has been taught has been learned. However this view of the curriculum does not in fact reflect how language teaching has always been understood, theorized, and practiced in recent times. Much debate and discussion about effective approaches to language teaching can be better understood by recognizing how differences in the starting points of curriculum development have

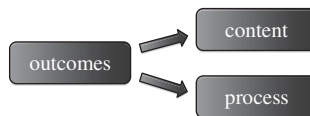
different implications and applications in language teaching. This leads to the distinction I wish to make between *forward design*, *central design*, and *backward design*. Forward design means developing a curriculum through moving from input, to process, and to output. Central design means starting with process and deriving input and output from classroom methodology. Backward design as the name implies, starts from output and then deals with issues relating to process and input. The three different processes of curriculum development can thus be represented in simple form as follows:



**Figure 2.** The Forward Design Process



**Figure 3.** The Central Design Process



**Figure 4.** The Backward Design Process

Each of these curriculum development approaches will now be illustrated and examples given of how they have influenced issues and approaches in language teaching.

## Forward Design

Forward design is based on the assumption that input, process, and output are related in a linear fashion. In other words, *before* decisions about methodology and output are determined, issues related to the content of instruction need to be resolved. Curriculum design is seen to constitute a sequence of stages that occur in a fixed order – an approach that has been referred to as a ‘waterfall’ model (Tessmer and Wedman, 1990) where the output from one stage serves as the input to the stage that follows. This approach is described in Richards and Rodgers (2001:143-44), summarizing Docking (1994):

the traditional approach to developing a syllabus\* involves using one’s understanding of subject matter as the basis for syllabus planning. One starts with the field of knowledge that one is going to teach (e.g. contemporary European history, marketing, listening comprehension, or French literature) and then selects concepts, knowledge, and skills that constitute that field of knowledge. A syllabus\* and the course content are then developed around the subject. Objectives may also be specified, but these usually have little role in teaching or assessing of

the subject. Assessment of students is usually based on norm referencing, that is, students will be graded on a single scale with the expectation that they spread across a wide range of scores or that they conform to a pre-set distribution.

[\* 'curriculum' in North American usage and as it is used in this paper]

Wiggins and McTighe (2006:15) give an illustration of this process with an example of a typical forward-design lesson plan:

- The teacher chooses a topic for a lesson (e.g. racial prejudice)
- The teacher selects a resource (e.g. *To Kill a Mocking-bird*)
- The teacher chooses instructional methods based on the resource and the topic (e.g. a seminar to discuss the book and cooperative groups to analyze stereotypical images in films and on television)
- The teacher chooses essay questions to assess student understanding of the book.

A similar example would be a teacher planning a unit around 'narratives' in a writing class. The starting point would be an understanding of the nature of narratives and their linguistic and discoursal features. Models of different kinds of narratives would then be studied as preparation for students writing their own narrative texts. Assessment tasks might involve reviewing and correcting poorly written narratives or writing further texts based on the features that had been taught and practiced.

In language teaching, forward planning is an option when the aims of learning are understood in very general terms such as in courses in 'general English' or with introductory courses at primary or secondary level where goals may be described in such terms as 'proficiency in language use across a wide range of daily situations', or 'communicative ability in the four language skills'. Curriculum planning in these cases involves operationalizing the notions of 'general English', or 'intermediate level English' or 'writing skills' in terms of units that can be used as the basis for planning, teaching and assessment. This is the approach that was adopted by the Council of Europe in the 1970s. John Trim was a key member of the group of experts commissioned by the Council of Europe to develop a new approach to language teaching, and he described what they wanted to achieve:

We set out to identify a number of coherent but restricted goals relevant to the communicative needs of the learner. We then attempt to work out in detail the knowledge and skills which will equip the learner to use the language for the communicative purposes defined. In the light of his characteristics and resources we then have to establish a formal language program leading to the mastery of this body of knowledge and skills, and a means of testing and evaluation to provide feedback to all parties concerned as to the success of the programme (Trim, 1978: 9).

A new approach to syllabus design was central to this enterprise.

### *Syllabus Design*

Syllabus design was a growth industry from the mid 1920s through to the latter part of the twentieth century and led to a number of key publications in which different

approaches to syllabus design were proposed (e.g. Wilkins, 1976; Munby, 1978; Willis, 1996). Debate over criteria for the choice of syllabus items (*selection*) as well as criteria for their sequencing (*gradation*) was a dominant issue in applied linguistics in the early and mid twentieth century, as described in Mackey's (1965) influential book *Language Teaching Analysis*. Intuition, frequency counts as well as text analysis have all been used as procedures in syllabus design.

### *Word Lists, Grammar Syllabuses, Corpora and Discourse Analysis*

English language teaching has been strongly influenced by the use of lists as input to teaching. West's *General Service List* (1953) identified a core set of some 2,000 lexical items needed to sustain language ability. Hindmarsh (1980) identified 4,500 words grouped into seven levels, a similar total to the list included in the Council of Europe's Threshold Level (Van Ek and Alexander, 1975). Lists of the core set of grammatical items learners needed to master were also developed such as Hornby's *Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (1954), which together with subsequent variants (e.g. Van Ek, 1976) have provided the basis for the grammatical syllabuses underlying language courses and course books ever since. The communicative language teaching movement in the 1980s prompted attempts to shift from grammar and lexis as the primary components of a syllabus, to communicative units of syllabus organization. This led to proposals for a number of different syllabus models, including notional, functional, lexical, text and task-based-models.

A more recent focus in syllabus design has been on the authenticity of the input that is provided as a basis for teaching and the role of corpora in determining linguistic input. Reppen comments:

English as a Second/Foreign Language professionals, from teachers to testing specialists, repeatedly make decisions about language, including which features and vocabulary to teach and/or test. In recent years, most ESL/EFL professionals have adopted a preference for "authentic" materials, presenting language from natural texts rather than made-up texts. Corpora provide a ready source of natural, or authentic texts for language learning (Reppen, 2010: 4).

Corpus analysis has revealed the importance of units beyond the level of vocabulary (e.g. phrases, multiword units and collocations) and provides information that can be used to update or replace the earlier generations of lists that have been used in syllabus design. O'Keefe et al., (2007: 22) suggest that 'course book dialogues, and even entire syllabi, can be informed by corpus data'. Another approach that has been used to provide authentic input to teaching is through the use of discourse analysis – a procedure that is used to study the nature of different text types, the ways they are used, and their lexical, grammatical, and textual features. This is particularly important in the design of courses in English for Special Purposes where the identification of the lexical, syntactic and textual structures of different genres is a pre-requisite to teaching specialized genres.

ESP curricula generally focus strongly on the description and illustration of communication and language use in the specialist field. Thus the language content of ESP courses is pivotal in ESP

course design. Many courses are strongly focused on language content (as opposed to content of another nature, such as learning strategies). Many courses have as a major objective that the students will have better understanding of communication and language use in the specialist field or target discourse community by the end of the course. Moreover, such courses generally aim to offer realistic descriptions of discourse derived from empirical investigations of communication and language use in the community or specialist field (Basturkmen, 2010: 36).

### *Syllabus and Methodology*

With a forward design approach, decisions about teaching processes or methodology *follow* from syllabus specification. Ideally, the planner starts with a theory of language and a syllabus derived from it and then looks for a learning theory that could be used as the basis for an appropriate pedagogy. In some cases there has been a natural link between input and process, between content and method, such as the natural link between structural linguistics and behaviorist learning theory that led to both the audiolingual method and situational language teaching and in the case of French, the audiovisual method that was used to teach the syllabus of *le Français fondamental*. However in theory a syllabus does not necessarily imply a particular methodology. A structural syllabus can be embodied in an audiolingual as well as a task-based course, and there are many different ways in which a text-based or functional syllabus can be taught. The point here is simply that with forward design, decisions about how to teach follow from decisions about the content of a course and decisions about output or learning outcomes follow from decisions about methodology.

### *Two Examples of Forward Design Approaches in Language Teaching*

The audiolingual method, the audiovisual method and the structural situational method have already been cited as examples of forward design methods. More recent examples include communicative language teaching and content based teaching/CLIL:

*Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*: the impetus for the development of CLT came from a change in the understanding of the nature of language, prompted by Hymes' notion of communicative competence. While the concept of communicative competence was embraced enthusiastically by the language teaching profession, an initial concern in CLT was with the operationalization of the notion of communicative competence and the development of a communicative syllabus to replace earlier grammar-based syllabus models. Trim (2012), one of the developers of the Threshold Level communicative syllabus mentioned previously, explains that it was an outcome of discussions about how to arrive at a new kind of syllabus that would reflect the theories of Hymes (communicative competence), Austin (speech acts), and Wilkins (notional analysis) and would deliver communicative competence as the outcome of teaching and learning. The result was the development of the syllabus that lies at the heart of Threshold level (Trim, 2012: 26). Clark suggests that the communicative approach still reflects the same assumptions as audiolingualism since they both start with a model of language that is broken down into smaller units – elements of knowledge and part-skills. These are then sequenced from simple to more complex and build towards the desired learning outcomes. This approach:

has had a powerful influence in recent years on the design of foreign language curriculum. It has given rise to the audio-lingual, audio-visual/situational, topic-based, and functional notional approach to foreign language learning ... All of these approaches have sought to bring about an effective communicative ability in learners as their ultimate goal, but have conceptualized this ability and the way to bring it about in different ways, adopting different organizing principles in the design of the foreign language curriculum. The audio-lingual approach conceptualized a communicative ability in terms of good grammatical habits. The audio/visual situational approach focused on the ability to understand and produce appropriate phrase related to particular situations. Topic-based approaches emphasized the ability to cope with certain topics. The functional-notional approach has focused on mastery of formal means to interpret and express certain predetermined meanings (Clark, 1987: 23).

The priority of syllabus specification over methodology in CLT is reflected in Munby's (1978) *Communicative Syllabus Design* – an influential book in its day and described as a model for specifying the syllabus content of a course based on learners' communicative needs. Methodological issues are described as a 'dimension of course design which is subsequent to syllabus specification' (Munby, 1978: 217). The next step in curriculum development with the Munby model thus involves designing a methodology that is compatible with a communicative syllabus. The final stage in the process is the development of principles for assessment, which aim to measure how well learners can demonstrate communicative language ability (Wier, 1990).

*Content-based Instruction (CoBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)*. Both CoBI (cited as *CoBI* here to distinguish it from Competency-based Instruction – CpBI in this paper) and its more recent variant CLIL are also examples of forward design. They seek to develop language proficiency as well the mastery of subject matter, critical thinking, and other cognitive skills through the use of a syllabus that integrates both language and subject matter (e.g. science, geography, history, environmental studies). Although CoBI and CLIL may take many different forms, as with other forward design models the process of developing a curriculum typically starts with the design of a syllabus that contains both content and language components. This then leads to the choice of suitable instructional materials as well as selection of activities for delivering, reviewing and assessing instruction (Crandall, 2012:150). The following example (from Mehisto et al., 2008: 50-69) illustrates in summary form the procedures used to develop a one-week science unit on volcanoes and is similar to the example from Wiggins and McTighe cited above.

1. Content and language needed for the topic of volcanoes is identified.
2. Aims in terms of content learning, language learning and skills learning are identified.
3. Resources chosen to facilitate a variety of whole class, group based and individual activities focusing on different aspects of content and language.
4. Informal assessment procedures used to assess student learning.

Like other communicative approaches, the instructional processes used in CoBI/CLIL are varied and no specific teaching methods are prescribed. A range of teaching activities are used, depending on the type of course and its context:



In CoBI, teachers can draw on a range of relevant, meaningful, and engaging activities that increase student motivation in a more natural manner, activities that involve co-operative, task-based, experiential, and project-based learning ...

CoBI lessons include the use of both authentic and adapted oral and written subject matter materials (textbooks, audio and visual materials, and other learning materials) that are appropriate to the cognitive and language proficiency level of the learners or that can be made accessible through bridging activities (Crandall, 2012: 151-52).

## Implementing a Forward Design Curriculum

The curriculum design process associated with forward design can be represented as:



**Figure 5.** Implementing a Forward Design

In some contexts the planning and development of each stage in the curriculum development process is carried out by different specialists who have expertise in each process, such as specialists in syllabus design, methodology, and assessment. Graves (2008: 150) describes this as a ‘specialist approach’, and comments:

In the specialist approach, the potential for mismatch [i.e. lack of alignment between the different components of the curriculum –author’s note] is great because each different group of people performs different curricular functions, uses different discourses, and produces different curricular products.

## Central Design

While a progression from input, to process, to output would seem to be a logical approach to the planning and delivery of instruction, it is only one route that can be taken. The second route I call *central design*. With central design, curriculum development *starts* with the selection of teaching activities, techniques and methods rather than with the elaboration of a detailed language syllabus or specification of learning outcomes. Issues related to input and output are dealt with *after* a methodology has been chosen or developed or during the process of teaching itself.

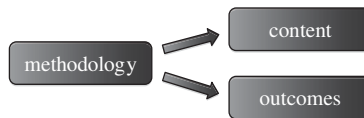
Clark (1987) refers to this as ‘progressivism’ and an example of a process approach to the curriculum.

We communicate, and if it is found useful we can look at the product of our efforts and discuss what has occurred by examining the exponents and attempting to relate them to particular notions and functions, or to lexical and grammatical categories. But this is an after-the-event

way of breaking up the flux and flow of a particular discourse, rather than means of predetermining what one may wish to say. This does not deny that the teacher and pupil may need to focus on particular elements of rhetorical, semantic, and grammatical content that arise in the discourse. It seems important to insist, however, that such focuses should arise out of language in use, rather than precede them, so that learners are enabled to discover rules of use, form-meaning relationships, and formal rules and systems against the backcloth of real contextualized discourse (Clark, 1987: 40).

Research on teachers' practices reveals that teachers often follow a central design approach when they develop their lessons by first considering the activities and teaching procedures they will use. Rather than starting their planning processes by detailed considerations of input or output, they start by thinking about the activities they will use in the classroom. While they assume that the exercises and activities they make use of will contribute to successful learning outcomes, it is the classroom processes they seek to provide for their learners that are generally their initial focus.

Thus:



**Figure 6.** Implementing a Central Design

Despite the approach they have been recommended to use in their initial teacher education, teachers' initial concerns are typically with what they want their learners to do during the lesson. Later their attention turns to the kind of input and support that learners will need to carry out the learning activities (Pennington and Richards, 1997). This contrasts with the linear forward-design model that teachers are generally trained to follow.

Summarizing research on teachers' planning, Freeman (1996: 97) observed:

[Teachers] did not naturally think about planning in the organized formats which they had been taught to use in their professional training. Further, when they did plan lessons according to these formats, they often did not teach them according to plan. Teachers were much more likely to visualize lessons as clusters or sequences of activities: they would blend content with activity, and they would generally focus on their particular students. In other words, teachers tended to plan lesson as ways of doing things, for given groups of students rather than to meet particular objectives.

This is illustrated in an account of how a second language teacher approached her lessons in a study by Fujiwara, where she describes her struggle to follow the prescribed linear forward-planning model (1996: 151):

... my method of planning still begins with activities and visions of the class. It's only when I look at the visions that I can begin to analyse why I'm doing what I'm doing. I also need to be in dialogue with students, so it's hard for me to design a year's course in the abstract. Just as my

language-learning process is no longer in awareness, so my planning process is based on layers and layers of assumptions, experiences, and knowledge. I have to dig down deep to find out why I make the decisions I do.

In general education this approach was advocated by Bruner (1966) and Stenhouse (1975) who argued that curriculum development should start by identifying the processes of inquiry and deliberation that drive teaching and learning – processes such as investigation, decision-making reflection, discussion, interpretation, critical thinking, making choices, co-operating with others and so on. Content is chosen on the basis of how it promotes the use of these processes and outcomes do not need to be specified in any degree of detail, if at all.

[The curriculum] is not designed on a pre-specification of behavioural objectives. Of course there are changes in students as result of a course, but many of the most valued are not to be anticipated in detail. The power and the possibilities of the curriculum cannot be contained within objectives because it is founded on the idea that knowledge must be speculative and thus indeterminate as to student outcomes if it is to be worthwhile (Stenhouse, 1975).

And again:

Education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students unpredictable (Stenhouse, 1970 in Clark, 1987: 35).

Central design can thus be understood as a ‘learner-focused and learning-oriented perspective’ (Leung, 2012). Graves alludes to this approach when she refers to ‘curriculum enactment’ as the essence of a curriculum.

The processes of planning, enacting and evaluating are interrelated and dynamic, not sequential. They move back and forth to inform and influence each other. Classroom enactment shapes planning and vice versa. Planning shapes evaluation and vice versa. The aim of evaluation is to improve teaching and learning, not just to measure it.

... In curriculum enactment, what happens in classrooms is the core of curriculum. What happens in classrooms is the evolving relationship between teacher, learners, and subject matter (Graves, 2008:152-53).

Clark’s description of the features of ‘progressivism’ captures the essence of central design:

- It places less emphasis on syllabus specification and more on methodological principles and procedures.
- It is more concerned with learning processes than predetermined objectives.
- It emphasizes methodology and the need for principles to guide the teaching learning process.
- It is learner-centered and seeks to provide learning experiences that enable learners to learn by their own efforts.
- It regards learners as active participants in shaping their own learning.

- It promotes the development of the learner as an individual.
- It views learning as a creative problem-solving activity.
- It acknowledges the uniqueness of each teaching-learning context.
- It emphasizes the role of the teacher in creating his or her own curriculum in the classroom  
(Clark, 1987: 49-90).

### *Central Design in Language Teaching*

*Novel Methods of the 1980s.* Language teaching in the first part of the twentieth century was shaped by teaching methods which reflected a forward planning approach. Methods such as the Audiolingual method, Situational Language Teaching, and early versions of Communicative Language Teaching had firm foundations in well-developed syllabuses, either grammatically based or with a more communicative framework as with CLT. But alternative bases for methods emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with the emergence of a number of instructional designs that rejected the need for pre-determined syllabuses or learning outcomes and were built instead around specifications of classroom activities. These new teaching methods and approaches started with *process*, rather than input or output and were often recognized by the novel classroom practices they employed. They reflected the central design approach – one in which methodology is the starting point in course planning and content is chosen in accordance with the methodology rather than the other way round. For example, Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach (1983) proposed that communicative classroom processes engaging the learners in meaningful interaction and communication and at an appropriate level of difficulty were the key to a language course, rather than building teaching around a predetermined grammatical syllabus.

In setting communicative goals, we do not expect the students at the end of a particular course to have acquired a certain group of structures or forms. Instead we expect them to deal with a particular set of topics in a given situation. We do not organize the activities of the class about a grammatical syllabus (Krashen and Terrell, 1983: 71).

Like other central-design proposals, there is no need for clearly defined outcomes or objectives. The purpose and content of a course 'will vary according to the needs of the students and their particular interests' (Krashen and Terrell, 1983: 65). Goals are stated in very general terms such as 'basic personal communication skills: oral' and 'basic personal communication skills: written'. The fact that the Natural Approach was not input or output driven (i.e. not built around a pre-determined syllabus and set of learning outcomes) meant that it could not provide a framework for the design of instructional materials and textbooks. Hence there are no syllabuses or published courses based on the Natural Approach.

Gategno's Silent Way (1972) can be understood as another example of central design in language teaching. Language input is not the starting point in the Silent Way. Rather than beginning with the development of a linguistic syllabus, Gategno was sceptical of the role of language analysis in teaching. Linguistic studies 'may be a specialization [that] carry with them a narrow opening of one's sensitivity and perhaps serve very little

towards the broad end in mind' (Gateno, 1972: 84). Gateno's starting point was a view of learning which saw it as a problem-solving, creative process of discovery. Cuisenaire rods (rods of different lengths and colors used to teach basic math) and pronunciation charts were artifacts and tools that facilitated comprehension, memory and recall. The method is intended to activate the learner's powers of awareness and capacity to learn. Both input and output are more or less taken for granted. While mastery of grammar and vocabulary and the ability to use language fluently and accurately are at the core of language mastery in the Silent Way, these require little detailed pre-planning and will be the outcome of the activities generated from the use of Cuisenaire rods and other items manipulated by the teacher.

Part of a philosophy known as a humanistic approach, Curran's Counseling Learning was another method that attracted some attention when it was introduced in the 1980s. Curran applied principles of counseling learning to language teaching. The classroom becomes a community of learners and teacher (the knower) and students enter into a process in which their interactions, experience and response to learning is seen as central to driving the teaching-learning process. Like other examples of central design approaches, there is no pre-determined syllabus and no specific linguistic or communicative goals. These are specific to each class and an outcome of the social interaction that occurs during the lesson. Students typically sit in a circle and express what they want to say. Translation by the teacher is used to help express the learner's intended meaning. Later, interactions and messages are recorded and revisited as a source of reflection, analysis, and further practice.

The progression is topic-based, with learners nominating things they wish to talk about and messages they wish to communicate to other learners. The teacher's responsibility is to provide a conveyance for these meanings in a way appropriate to the learners' proficiency level; ... a syllabus emerges from the interactions between the learner's expressed communicative intentions and the teacher's reformulation of these into suitable target-language utterances (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 93).

*Task-based Language Teaching TBLT (Version 1)*. There are several different versions of TBLT, some described as task-based and some described as task-informed and since there is no consensus as to the exact nature of a TBLT course it is best described as an approach rather than a method. They share in the use of 'tasks' as the mechanism that best activates language learning processes. Tasks in this approach are activities in which the primary focus is on meaning, there is some kind of information gap, learners need to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and there is an outcome other than merely the display of language.

Central-design versions of TBLT are those which employ primary pedagogical tasks as the basis for classroom instruction – specially designed classroom activities that are intended to call upon the use of specific interactional strategies and may also require the use of specific types of language (skills, grammar, vocabulary). The tasks drive the processes of second language learning and linguistic and communicative competence are the outcomes of task work (Willis, 1996). There is no pre-determined grammatical syllabus and the goals are to develop general language ability rather than the ability to use language in specific contexts and for specific purposes. This use of TBLT is sometimes applied in teaching young

learners and in other contexts where learners do not have very specific needs for the English. (Compare this with TBLT version 2 below in a backward design approach).

*Dogme.* A more recent example of the use of central design in language teaching has been labelled Dogme (a term taken from the film industry that refers to filming without scripts or rehearsal) by Scott Thornbury – who introduced the approach to language teaching (Meddings and Thornbury, 2009). It is based on the idea that instead of basing teaching on a pre-planned syllabus, a set of objectives and published materials, teaching is built around conversational interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves.

Teaching should be done using only the resources that the teachers and students bring to the classroom- i.e. themselves and what happens to be in the classroom.

Thornbury explains that dogme considers learning as experiential and holistic and that language learning is an emergent jointly-constructed and socially-constituted process motivated both by communal and communicative imperatives.

(<http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2012/01/22/a-is-for-approach>).

An approach that shares some features with Counseling Learning (but without the New Age psycho-babble), the syllabus or language focus is not pre-planned and language and content emerge from the processes of interaction and negotiation that the teacher initiates. Midlane comments:

A Dogme approach focuses on emergent language; teaching is not a question of imposing an external language syllabus, but of nurturing the students' in-built language-learning mechanisms and language acquisition agenda

([www.deltapublishing.co.uk/content/pdf/teaching-unplugged/TU\\_TEFL\\_review.pdf](http://www.deltapublishing.co.uk/content/pdf/teaching-unplugged/TU_TEFL_review.pdf) ).

*Post-method Teaching.* This term is sometimes used to refer to teaching which is not based on the prescriptions and procedures of a particular method nor which follows a pre-determined syllabus but which draws on the teacher's individual conceptualizations of language, language learning and teaching, the practical knowledge and skills teachers develop from training and experience, the teacher's knowledge of the learners' needs, interests and learning styles, as well as the teacher's understanding of the teaching context (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). The teacher's 'method' is constructed from these sources rather than being an application of an external set of principles and practices. The kinds of content and activities that the teacher employs in the classroom as well as the outcomes he or she seeks to achieve will depend upon the nature of the core principles that serve as the basis for the teacher's thinking and decision-making.

*The Ecological Classroom.* Van Lier refers to the classroom as an 'ecology'. As summarized by Graves (2008: 168):

In a classroom as an ecology, learning is not a system of “inputs” which individual learners convert into “output”. Rather, the environment provides affordances or opportunities for meaningful action. Therefore the learners’ activities and participation are structured “so that access is available and encouragement encouraged” (van Lier, 2000: 253). Learners are seen as a heterogeneous group in which each member has something to say to each other and to the teacher (van Lier, 2007). In the ecological perspective, the curriculum does not start out by specifying and sequencing materials, “but with the ‘activities, needs, and emergent purposes of the learner. On the basis of activities and emergent needs, the teacher makes resources available in the environment, and guides the learner’s perception and action towards an array of affordances that can further his or her goals” (Graves, 2008: 8).

Tsui (2005, cited in Graves 2008:168) contrasts the ecological approaches with traditional approaches by comparing the kinds of questions a teacher might ask working within what is described here as a forward design and central design approach:

*Forward Design Issues:*

What linguistic forms do we want to teach?

How do we represent these items in the form of tasks or activities?

How do we get learners to use the target items to complete the tasks or activities, either individually or in pairs/groups?

Are there any gaps between the target language structures/functions and those produced by the students?

*Central Design Issues:*

What opportunities are afforded for learners to participate in meaning making?

What kind of shared understanding needs to be established among the learners?

What kind of participation framework is being set up and what are the role configurations for the group and for the individual learner over time?

What opportunities have been created by learners in the process of participation?

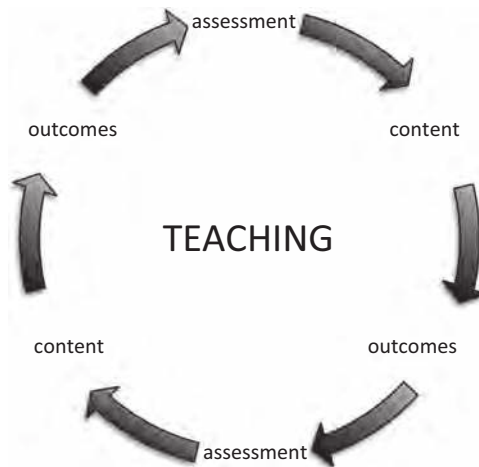
Graves (2008: 169) observes:

The former type of questions is more concerned with how specific ‘inputs’ become observable ‘output’ rather than with ways in which learners are themselves creators of meaning and collaborators in understanding and extending it.

## **Implementing a Central Design Curriculum**

Each of the innovations referred to above offers different versions of the idea of a classroom as focused on the learner or as a learning community, a notion which has been theorized in greater detail and depth by Wenger (1998), van Lier (2004, 2009) and others. From this perspective, learning takes place in a context and evolves through the interaction and participation of the participants in that context. Learning is not viewed as the mastery of pre-determined content but as constructing new knowledge through participating in specific learning and social contexts and through engaging in particular types of activities and processes.

Yet in other respects the approaches described above are a disparate group that reflect very different assumptions about the nature of second language learning and the role of instruction in language teaching. What they have in common, however, is the priority they attribute to learning processes, classroom participation, and the role of the teacher and the learners in creating opportunities for learning. The syllabus or learning input – rather than being something that is predetermined or prescribed and regarded as essential in initiating curriculum development, is rather an *outcome* of teaching and learning. In the older method-based proposals referred to above, testing has the role of assessment *of* learning (i.e. achievement testing) while in the more recent proposals a more dynamic role for assessment is assumed – assessment *for* learning – where teaching and assessment inform each other at every stage of the teaching/learning process. The ongoing interaction between the different curriculum elements can be represented as follows:



**Figure 7.** Interaction between Elements of a Central Design

## Backward Design

The third approach to curriculum design is to begin with a specification of learning outputs and to use these as the basis for developing instructional processes and input. Following Wiggins and McTighe (2006) and continuing with the analogy of *forward* and *central design* used above, the term *backward design* will be used to describe this approach. Backward design starts with a careful statement of the desired results or outcomes: appropriate teaching activities and content are derived from the results of learning. This is a well-established tradition in curriculum design in general education and in recent years has re-emerged as a prominent curriculum development approach in language teaching. It was sometimes described as an ‘ends-means’ approach, as seen in the work of Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962), who viewed instruction as the specification of ends as a pre-requisite to devising the means to reach them. The process consists of:



- Step 1: diagnosis of needs
- Step 2: formulation of objectives
- Step 3: selection of content
- Step 4: organization of content
- Step 5: selection of learning experiences
- Step 6: organization of learning experiences
- Step 7: determination of what to evaluate and of the ways of doing it (Taba, 1962: 12).

The role of methodology was to determine which teaching methods were most effective in attaining the objectives and a criterion-referenced approach would be used for assessment. There is no place for individually-determined learning outcomes: the outcomes are determined by the curriculum designer.

The following are examples of the use of backward design in language teaching.

*Backward Design through Objectives.* Tyler's work had a considerable impact on curriculum planning and helped establish the use of objectives as planning units in instructional design. An objectives-based approach reflects the essential assumptions of backward design. As Tyler put it:

Educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed, and tests and examinations are prepared. ... The purpose of a statement of objectives is to indicate the kinds of changes in the student to be brought about so that instructional activities can be planned and developed in a way likely to attain these objectives (1949: 45).

From the 1950s, educating teachers in how to describe learning outcomes in the form of objectives became a minor industry, and since then generations of teachers have been taught to write objectives that fulfilled criteria such as the following:

1. They describe the aims of a course in terms of smaller units of learning.
2. They provide the basis for the organization of teaching activities.
3. They describe learning in terms of observable behaviour or performance.

Critics of the use of objectives in curriculum planning argued that they are linked to an efficiency view of education, that is, one based on the assumption that the most efficient means to an end is justified, that they run the danger of turning teaching into a technical and almost mechanical exercise of converting statement of needs into objectives, and that in the process the broader goals of teaching and learning – to provide meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences – are forgotten. This criticism is often aimed at curriculum focused on narrowly defined behavioural objectives. It is also implied by advocates of a central-based approach to curriculum planning. As we noted above, teachers tend not to start planning instruction around outcomes but often focus their planning on classroom activities, i.e. central design.

However, the use of classroom activities and processes as the starting point in instructional planning is strongly criticized by Wiggins and McTighe (2006), who argue for starting with a clear description of learning outcomes as the basis for curriculum planning. In backward design they recommend that three steps are required:

1. Identify desired results.
2. Determine acceptable evidence of learning.
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction.

The planning process begins with a clear understanding of the ends in mind. It explicitly rejects as a starting point the process or activity-oriented curriculum in which participation in activities and processes is primary. It does not imply any particular pedagogical approach or instructional theory or philosophy. A variety of teaching strategies can be employed to achieve the desired goals but teaching methods cannot be chosen until the desired outcomes have been specified. From this perspective many of the central-design methods or activity-oriented approaches discussed above fail to meet the criterion of good instructional design.

The error of activity-oriented design might be called “hands-on without being minds-on” – engaging experiences that lead only accidentally, if at all, to insight or achievement ... activity-oriented curricula lack an explicit focus on important ideas and evidence of learning. ... [learners] are led to think the learning is the activity instead of seeing that the learning comes from being asked to consider the meaning of the activity ... The shift, therefore, is away from starting with such questions as “What book will we read?” or “What activities will we do?” or “What will we discuss” to “What should [the learners] walk out the door able to understand [or do] regardless of what activities or tests we use?” And “What is evidence of such ability?” and, therefore, “What texts, activities, and methods will best enable such a result?” (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006: 16-17).

In language teaching a number of curriculum approaches and procedures have been advocated that reflect the principles of backward design.

**Needs Analysis.** Identifying learning outcomes or objectives is often seen to depend upon a systematic analysis of the learners’ communicative needs, and emerged in the 1960s as part of the systems approach to curriculum development – an aspect of the prevalent philosophy of educational accountability from which the use of objectives was also derived (Stufflebeam et al., 1985).

The need for convincing precision in educational needs assessment was also reinforced during this period by the behavioural objectives movement in educational planning, particularly in North America, which insisted on specifying in measurable form all goals of importance in an educational system. The emphasis on precision and accountability clearly influenced the appearance of needs assessment as a form of educational technology and its diversification into a collection of educational research methodologies (Berwick, 1989: 51).

Needs analysis is part of the process by which aims and objectives are determined:

Informal needs assessment deals with the informal negotiation that takes place between class teachers and students in the form of chats with either individual students, groups of students, or the whole class in order to select a focus for the class ... [It] is a necessary component of information retrieval on students' learning needs and should be recorded. It can subsequently be used as input for aims and objective setting and for devising course outlines (Shaw and Dowsett, 1986: 47-49).

The steps involved are:

1. Identify learner's communicative needs.
2. Develop statements of learning objectives.
3. Identify linguistic content and skills needed to attain the objectives.
4. Prepare course plans.
5. Select materials and teaching methods.

*Task-based Language Teaching (Version 2)*. Needs analysis is also the starting point for curriculum development in some versions of Task-Based Language Teaching and is used to determine an inventory of target-tasks learners need to be able to master in the target language.

The design of a task-based syllabus\* preferably starts with an analysis of the students' needs. What do these students need to be able to do with the target language? What are the tasks they are supposed to perform outside of the classroom? Using different sources and different methods (such as interviews, observations, and surveys) a concrete description of the kinds of tasks students will face in the real world is drawn up. This description, then, serves as the basis for the design and sequencing of tasks in the syllabus (Van den Branden, 2012: 134). [\*i.e. 'curriculum' as used in this paper].

The methodology of this approach to TBLT is then built around activities or tasks that require communicative language use, from which the learners' need for particular aspects of language is derived:

In TBLT, students do not first acquire elaborate knowledge about language then face the daunting challenge to translate all the acquired knowledge into spontaneous and natural language use. In a task-based approach, students are confronted with approximations and simulations of the kinds of tasks they are supposed to be able to perform outside the classroom and learn about relevant forms of language while trying to understand and produce the language that these communicative tasks involve (Van den Branden, 2012:133).

Thus in this model of TBLT the sequence is:

1. Identify target tasks through needs analysis.
2. Design classroom tasks.
3. Apply TBLT methodology.
4. Identify language and other demands of the tasks.
5. Follow up language work.

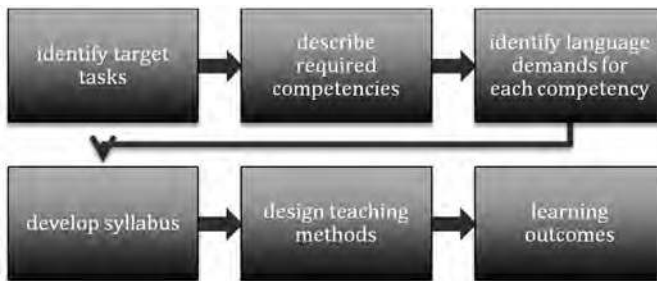


**Figure 8.** Development Stages in Task-based Language Teaching

This can be represented as:

*Competency-based Instruction (CpBI).* Competency-Based Instruction is another widely used example of backward design. With CpBI the starting point of curriculum design is a specification of the learning outcomes in terms of ‘competencies’ – the knowledge, skills and behaviors learners involved in performing everyday tasks and activities and which learners should master at the end of a course of study. Curriculum development with CpBI starts from a similar stage as TBLI in the version described above. The characteristics of CpBI are described by Schenk (1978: vi).

Competency-based education has much in common with such approaches to learning as performance-based instruction, mastery learning and individualized instruction. It is outcome-based and is adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers and the community... Competencies differ from other student goals and objectives in that they describe the student’s ability to apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life. Thus CBE is based on a set of outcomes that are derived from an analysis of tasks typically required of students in life role situations.



**Figure 9.** Development Stages in Competency Based Instruction

The process can be represented as:

An example of how this approach was used in developing a vocational curriculum for refugees and immigrants in the US is given in Mrowicki (1986). The process consisted of:

1. Needs analysis.
2. Identify topics for the survival curriculum (e.g. banking, health, shopping).

3. Identify competencies for each topic.
4. Group competencies into instructional units.
5. Identify the language knowledge and skills needed for each instructional unit (e.g. the 4 skills, vocabulary, grammar).
6. Choose instructional materials.

Advocates of CpBI suggest it has similar advantages to the backward design approach proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (2006).

Competency-based approaches to teaching and assessment offer teachers an opportunity to revitalize their education and training programs. Not only will the quality of assessment improve, but the quality of teaching and student learning will be enhanced by clear specification of expected outcomes and the continuous feedback that competency-based assessment can offer (Docking, 1994:15).

Like other backward design approaches, CpBI makes no assumptions about teaching methods, since any set of classroom activities can be used that enables students to master the desired competencies. However, since student learning is assessed on the basis of performance and the ability to demonstrate mastery of pre-specified skills and behaviours, teaching is generally based on helping learners acquire the communicative skills needed for specific situations, tasks and activities. As with other backward design approaches, needs analysis is the starting point in curriculum development.

*Standards and the Common European Framework of Reference.* A related approach to backward design is through the use of standards (also known as benchmarks, core skills, performance profiles and target competencies). Standards are descriptions of the outcomes or targets students should be able to reach in different domains of curriculum content, including language learning, and are generally specified in very general terms. For example standards related to the use of both oral and written language could include:

Students will develop knowledge and understanding of:

- The relationship between texts and contexts
- Cultural reference in text
- The relationship between purposes and structures of texts
- Language forms and features of texts (McKay, 2000).

Katz and Snow (2009: 67) offer the following explanation of standards:

Standards may be described as tools that can be used to improve outcomes. The kind of outcomes desired depends on the goals for improvement – whether they target teachers, teacher trainers, educational leaders, students, programs – and so on. The major benefit of standards is that they set out clear expectations for all involved in the educational enterprise, including the public. They provide a “common language” for talking about the process of teaching and learning. For teachers and administrators, they provide guidelines for designing instruction, curricula, and assessment.

The primary motivation for an increased emphasis on statements of learning outcomes in the design of language programs and particularly the use of ‘standards’ as ways of identifying learning targets across a curriculum is described by Leung (2012):

the prominence of outcomes-based teaching in the past thirty years or so can be associated with the wider public policy environments in which the twin doctrines of corporatist management (whereby the activities in different segments of society are subordinated to the goals of the state) and public accountability (which requires professionals to justify their activities in relation to declared public policy goals) have predominated.

In order to assist in the planning process, standards are generally accompanied with more specific ‘indicators’ that ‘describe assessable, observable activities or behaviors that may be performed to show the standard is being met’ (Katz and Snow, 2009: 67). These are often described in terms of competencies. The following is an example of a standard with related indicators in the domain of oral language use:

*Standard:* the learner can participate in casual conversation

*Indicators:*

- Can use strategies to open and close conversations.
- Can initiate a topic in casual conversation.
- Can select vocabulary appropriate to the topic.
- Can give appropriate feedback responses.
- Can provide relevant evaluative comments through back channeling.
- Can take turns at appropriate points in the conversation.
- Can ask for clarification and repetition.
- Can use strategies for repairing misunderstanding.
- Can use appropriate intonation and stress patterns to express meaning intelligibly (Adapted from Goh and Burns, 2012: 180).

The use of standards in curriculum planning thus involves the following sequence of activities:

- Identify the domains of language use the learners need to acquire (e.g. reading, writing, listening, speaking).
- Describe standards and performance indicators for each domain.
- Identify the language skills and knowledge needed to achieve the standard.
- Select teaching activities and materials.

Perhaps the most widespread example of backward design using standards in current use is the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), which is designed to provide a ‘common basis for explicit description of objectives, content and methods of the study of modern languages, within a wider purpose of elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks’ etc. across Europe’ (Council of Europe, 2001:1). It describes six levels of achievement divided into three broad divisions from lowest (A1) to

highest (C2) which describe what a learner should be able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at each level.

Basic user – A1, A2

Independent user – B1, B2

Proficient user - C1, C2

For example the standards described for ‘conversation’ in CEFR at levels B1 to C1 are described as follows:

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Conversation in the Common European Framework

---

C2	Can converse comfortably and appropriately, unhampered by any linguistic limitations in conducting a full social and personal life.
C1	Can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.
B2	Can engage in extended conversation on most general topics in a clearly participatory fashion, even in a noisy environment. Can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker. Can convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences.
B1	Can enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics. Can follow clearly articulated speech directed at him/her in everyday conversations, though will sometimes have to ask for repetition of particular words and phrases. Can maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what he/she would like to. Can express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.

---

No specifications are given for input or process. It is the teacher’s or course designer’s responsibility to work out how the outcomes can be achieved and to develop teaching strategies and materials and content relevant to the context in which they are teaching. Leung (2012:165) comments:

Quite clearly teachers will need to judge the appropriateness of the B1 descriptors (or any other within the CEFR scales) in relation to the students they are teaching. If one is working with, say, a group of Italian-speaking bank employees learning English for professional reasons, then some of the descriptors might make sense at some stage of their teaching. However, if one is teaching linguistic minority students in England who are learning to use English to do academic studies, then these descriptors would only be, at best, appropriate in a very vague and abstract sense; they would need to be adapted and expanded locally because an independent user of English as a second language in school would have to do a good deal more than what is covered in these CEFR descriptors.

The lack of a syllabus or specification of content that would enable the outcomes in CEFR to be achieved has been identified as problematic in using the framework and has led to the development of the English Profile project:

The aim of English Profile is to create a “profile” or set of Reference Level Descriptions of English linked to the CEF. These will provide detailed information about the language that learners can be expected to demonstrate at each level, offering a clear benchmark for progress that will inform curriculum development as well as the development of courses and test materials to support learners, teachers and other professionals involved in the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language.

(<http://www.englishprofile.org/>).

Backward design with CEFR thus involves:



**Figure 10.** Development Stages with the Common European Framework

## Conclusions

A question teachers and planners often ask when presented with alternative ways of addressing an issue is, ‘Which approach is best?’ The assumption underlying this paper is that there is no best approach to curriculum design, and that forward design, central design and backward design might each work well but in different circumstances. Each approach has advocates and practitioners who can cite examples of their successful implementation. They might also work concurrently in some circumstances. David Crabbe (personal communication) suggests:

In fact, design goes backwards and forwards whatever the starting point. As you point out, it’s not that curriculum designers don’t think of goals when designing a syllabus. It’s just that a content item is not expressed as a goal. Similarly, a central design has a broad outcome in mind, even though it might not be specified in detail. A backward design will often take account of the process of teaching an item in formulating the outcome and it will often have content built into it. All three may be thought of at the same time, rather than being linear.

Each approach however makes different assumptions about the context for the curriculum, for example:

- whether intended for large-scale or small-scale implementation,
- the role of instructional materials and tests,
- the level of training of teachers,



- the roles of teachers and learners,
- teachers' proficiency in English,
- the demands made on teachers,
- the level of teacher-autonomy assumed for teachers,
- the amount of support provided for teachers.

A forward design option may be preferred in circumstances where a mandated curriculum is in place, where teachers have little choice over what and how to teach, where teachers rely mainly on textbooks and commercial materials rather than teacher-designed resources, where class size is large and where tests and assessments are designed centrally rather than by individual teachers. Since forward design can be used to develop published materials there will generally be a wide range of teaching resources and materials to choose from. Forward design may also be a preferred option in situations where teachers may have limited English language proficiency and limited opportunities for professional development, since much of the planning and development involved can be accomplished by specialists rather than left to the individual teacher.

Central design approaches do not require teachers to plan detailed learning outcomes, to conduct needs analysis or to follow a prescribed syllabus, hence they often give teachers a considerable degree of autonomy and control over the teacher learning process. In the case of method-based approaches, however, teachers may be required to understand the sometimes obscure theory underlying the method as well as to master techniques and procedures that may initially prove difficult. Or they may simply adopt the practices without worrying about their claims and theoretical assumptions since they offer a supposedly 'tried and tested or expert-designed' teaching solution. Adoption of a central design approach may also require a considerable investment in training, since teachers cannot generally rely on published course-book materials as the basis for teaching. With post-method and learner-community approaches, teaching strategies are developed according to the teacher's understanding of the context in which he or she is working as well as on his or her individual skill and expertise in managing the instructional process and in developing teaching materials and forms of assessment. High levels of professional knowledge as well as of language proficiency are probably a prerequisite.

A backward design option may be preferred in situations where a high degree of accountability needs to be built into the curriculum design and where resources can be committed to needs analysis, planning, and materials development. Well-developed procedures for implementing backward design procedures are widely available, making this approach an attractive option in some circumstances. In the case of large-scale curriculum development for a national education system, much of this development activity can be carried out by others, leaving teachers mainly with the responsibility of implementing the curriculum. In other circumstances such as a private institute developing company specific courses, a much more bottom-up approach may be adopted and the work required is carried out by a well-trained and skilful individual teacher or group of teachers working together. The characteristics of forward, backward and central design are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Features of the Three Approaches Compared \*

	Forward design	Central design	Backward design
<b>Syllabus</b>	<i>Language-centred</i> <i>Content divided into its key elements</i> <i>Sequenced from simple to complex</i> <i>Pre-determined prior to a course</i> <i>Linear progression</i>	<i>Activity-based</i> <i>Content negotiated with learners</i> <i>Evolves during the course</i> <i>Reflects the process of learning</i> <i>Sequence may be determined by the learners</i>	<i>Needs based</i> <i>Ends-means approach</i> <i>Objectives or competency-based</i> <i>Sequenced from part-skills to whole</i> <i>Pre-determined prior to course</i> <i>Linear progression</i>
<b>Methodology</b>	<i>Transmissive and teacher-directed</i> <i>Practice and control of elements</i> <i>Imitation of models</i> <i>Explicit presentation of rules</i>	<i>Learner-centred</i> <i>Experiential learning</i> <i>Active engagement in interaction and communication</i> <i>Meaning prioritized over accuracy</i> <i>Activities that involve negotiation of meaning</i>	<i>Practice of part-skills</i> <i>Practice of real-life situations</i> <i>Accuracy emphasized</i> <i>Learning and practice of expressions and formulaic language</i>
<b>Role of teacher</b>	<i>Teacher as instructor, model, and explainer</i> <i>Transmitter of knowledge</i> <i>Reinforcer of correct language use</i>	<i>Teacher as facilitator</i> <i>Negotiator of content and process</i> <i>Encourager of learner self-expression and autonomy</i>	<i>Organizer of learning experiences</i> <i>Model of target language performance</i> <i>Planner of learning experiences</i>
<b>Role of learner</b>	<i>Accurate mastery of language forms</i> <i>Application of learned material to new contexts</i> <i>Understanding of language rules</i>	<i>Negotiator of learning content and modes of learning</i> <i>Development of learning strategies</i> <i>Accept responsibility for learning and learner autonomy</i>	<i>Learning through practice and habit formation</i> <i>Mastery of situationally appropriate language</i> <i>Awareness of correct usage</i> <i>Development of fluency</i>
<b>Assessment</b>	<i>Norm-referenced, summative end-of-semester or end-of-course test</i> <i>Assessment of learning</i> <i>Cumulative mastery of taught forms</i>	<i>Negotiated assessment</i> <i>Assessment for learning</i> <i>Formative assessment</i> <i>Self-assessment</i> <i>Develop capacity for self-reflection and self-evaluation</i>	<i>Criterion-referenced</i> <i>Performance based</i> <i>Summative assessment</i> <i>Improvement oriented</i> <i>Assessment of learning</i> <i>Cumulative mastery of taught patterns and uses</i>

\* This table draws on Clark (1987: 93–99).

In conclusion, any language teaching curriculum contains the elements of content, process, and output. Historically these have received a different emphasis at different times. Curriculum approaches differ in how they visualize the relationship between these

elements, how they are prioritized and arrived at, and the role that syllabuses, materials, teachers and learners play in the process of curriculum development and enactment. The notion of forward, central and backward design provides a useful metaphor for understanding the different assumptions underlying each approach to curriculum design as well as for recognizing the different practices that result from them.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Acknowledgements

The ideas for this paper were first presented to Hugo Loyola during a flight from Sao Paulo to Santiago in July 2012, and elaborated informally the next day to participants at a seminar in Chile. The participants asked for a written version of the talk, which led to this paper that was prepared while I was teaching at the Regional Language Centre in Singapore in October 2012. I am grateful to Martha Pennington, David Crabbe, and Hayo Reinders for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Scott Thornbury for enthusiastic support.

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