Grading and Sequencing Tasks in Task-Based Syllabus: A Critical Look at Criterion Selection

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Abstract—The necessity of grading and sequencing tasks has led to the development of different criteria in this regard. However, appropriateness of these criteria in different situations is less discussed. This paper attempts to shed more light on the priority of different criteria in relation with different factors including learners, teachers, educational, and cultural factors.

Keywords—Criteria, Grading, Sequencing, Language learning tasks.

I. INTRODUCTION

TASK-BASED syllabus follows the analytic approach to syllabus design. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) argues for an analytic syllabus based on what is known about the processes of second language learning, the findings of second language classroom research, and principles of course design made explicit in the 1970s for the teaching of languages for specific purposes [1]. However, a controversial issue in task-based syllabus is grading and sequencing tasks.

As put by [2], "natural sequences do not really exist in sufficient detail to be used as the basis for a precise order, nor have they been shown to facilitate learning in a second language situation" page 11. Likewise, [1] and [3] argue that grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks is indeed a major challenge for the task-based syllabus designers. This has resulted in the development of some models or criteria for grading and sequencing tasks of which reference can be made to the criteria offered by [4]-[9]. However, there is no consensus over any of them, as "grading task difficulty and sequencing tasks appear to be arbitrary processes, which are left partly to judgments by the classroom teacher" [1] page 37. To [10], grading tasks calls for what [10] calls "teachers sense of plausibility" page 172. Along the same line, [11] considers it as depending on the material designer's intuition. Likewise, [12] blames lacking a well-defined model of cognitive complexity. However, [5] contends that "grading tasks cannot follow a precise algorithmic procedure but rather must proceed more intuitively in accordance with a general assessment of task complexity" page 227. Reference [5] adds that grading tasks, although difficult, is not impossible.

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II. CRITERIA FOR GRADING AND SEQUENCING TASKS

Identifying possible sources of task complexity is a prerequisite for making principled decisions about grading and sequencing of tasks [1] and [3]. In task-based syllabus, task complexity can be used for grading tasks. As [13] points out, the rationale for investigating task complexity springs from the need to establish criteria for grading and sequencing tasks in a syllabus.

Reference [7] distinguishes between task complexity and task difficulty. He considers task complexity as "the result of the intentional memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task on the language learner." page 29. As [5] puts it, "task complexity "can account for intra-learner variability" page 221. Similarly, [7] uses the term task difficulty to refer to factors relating to learners as individuals, which can influence how easy or difficult a particular task is for different participants. These factors include the learner's intelligence, language aptitude, learning style, memory capacity, and motivation.

There are different factors contributing to task complexity, which are - in turn- used as criteria for task gradation and sequencing purposes. The present paper focuses on three sets of factors: linguistic criteria, cognitive criteria, and dialogical criteria. The first set of factors includes the linguistic variables. Grammatical complexity, length of a text, the amount of low-frequency vocabulary, the speed of spoken texts, the explicitness of the information, the discourse structure, the clarity with which this is signaled, and the genre of text are language-related variables which influence task complexity [3]. Regarding linguistic variables, [5] refers to code complexity (i.e., lexical and syntactic complexity) as an input-related factor influencing task complexity. Along the same line, [4] emphasizes the role of grammatical complexity in determining the complexity of what the learners have to do.

The second set of factors influencing task complexity, and task gradation and sequencing consists of psycholinguistic variables. These psycholinguistic variables are concerned with cognitive processes involved in the accomplishment of language learning tasks. As criteria for grading tasks, [6] identifies rough measures of cognitive complexity including, information provided, reasoning needed, precision needed, familiarity with constraints, and degree of abstractness. Similarly, [4] contends that the complexity of what the learners have to do is determined by such factors as relevance (i.e., Is the task meaningful and relevant to the learner?), complexity (e.g., How many steps are involved in the task?),

and the amount of context provided prior to the task (i.e., How much prior knowledge of the world is provided?). Procedural factors involved in task performance can also influence the mental processes required for accomplishing a given task. Reference [3] defines procedural factors as "the operations that learners are required to perform on input data" page 122. Moreover, tasks can be graded based on conceptual development. Much in the same vein, [14] makes the claim that it is possible to stage increases in the cognitive demands of language learning tasks which recapitulate conceptual development in childhood. For example, there can be a movement from tasks in the Here-and-Now, to tasks requiring reference to the There-and-Then. Along the same line, [5] argues that tasks with closed outcomes will be easier to accomplish as the participant knows that there is one correct answer and he/she can direct his/her efforts more purposefully. Moreover, [3] refers to 'psycholinguistic processing' approach in which tasks are sequenced based on the cognitive and performance demands made upon the learner. This approach requires learners to undertake activities which become increasingly demanding, for instance, moving from comprehension-based activities to controlled production activities and exercises, and finally to activities involving authentic communicative interaction.

Finally, the third set of factors which influence task complexity, and task gradation and sequencing involves dialogical issues. In his discussion of second language acquisition (SLA) research tradition, [15] refers to the dialogical tradition as an approach which includes, among others, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's dialogized heteroglossia.

The social origin of human mental processes constitutes one of the tenets of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. This indicates that learning takes place through social activity [15]. Social factors influencing learning can be employed in task gradation and sequencing in preparing language instructional materials as well. Along the same line, [4] contends that the amount of help available to the learner (i.e., How much assistance can the learner get from the teacher, other learners, books or other learning aids? In the case of interactive tasks, is the interlocutor sympathetic, does he/she provide help?) influences task complexity.

Another point of concern is that the dimensions of task complexity can be manipulated such that pedagogic tasks can be performed in an order that gradually approximates the demands of real-world task accomplishment. As an example, a task which requires a speaker to give directions to another person using a map could initially be designed so the speaker has time for planning, has the route marked on the map, and where the map is of a small, mutually known area [14]. In this example, the marking of the rout plays a mediating role in facilitating the learner's performance of the task.

This indicates that tasks involving the mediating role of the teacher and other mediators should precede tasks conducted without the teacher's assistance or other mediations. The teacher can facilitate the learners' performance through

providing a model in the pre-task phase. In this regard, [3] states that the standard way is to have three phases: a pre-task phase, a task-proper phase, and a follow-up phase. It should be noted that [6] considers a pre-task not as a 'demonstration' but as "a task in its own right" page 54. The teacher's mediation in the pre-task phase enables the learner to accomplish the task first with the teacher's intervention and then on his own. As [16] puts it, there is a movement from interpersonal (social) plane to the intrapersonal (individual) plane.

Reference [17] refers to the role of information distribution in determining task complexity. Reference [17] explains that a distinction can be made between distributions which produce a one-way and a two-way flow of information. In a one-way configuration, all of the information related to the task is given to one learner who must communicate it to the other. In a two-way configuration, the information related to the task is distributed among all of the learners who must share and integrate it. In this regard, [18] notes that one-way tasks promote less negotiation of meaning than two-way tasks. And this affects the complexity of the task. Reference [19] states that "the word … exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own'' pages 293–94. This implies that tasks can be graded and sequenced from dialogical perspective. That is to say, tasks involving dialogues should precede those involving monologues. In other words, two-way tasks are expected to appear prior to one-way tasks.

III. Factors to Consider in Criterion Selection

In an attempt to investigate influential factors in determining the criterion for grading and sequencing tasks, we offer three sets of factors: individual (learners and teachers), educational, and cultural factors.

A. Individuals (Learners and Teachers)

In deciding about the criteria for grading tasks, the first factor to consider is learner variables. As [20] argues, it is largely the learners, rather than teachers, who control what is learnt. Therefore, task gradation and sequencing need to be in line with individualized education. In the same vein, [21] highlights the importance of fine-tuning materials to suit the specific needs of learners. Reference [21] goes on stating that this is something which, by definition, is lacking in an off-the-shelf course.

Such textbooks are not in conformity with humanistic and whole-person views of learning. A whole-person view of learning indicates that in second language syllabus design, including task-based syllabus, task gradation, and task sequencing, the learner should be considered as a whole person. In other words, linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions need to be considered in grading and sequencing tasks in task-based syllabus design. Along the same line, [22] argues that materials should achieve impact. "Impact is achieved when materials have a noticeable effect on learners, that is when the learners' curiosity, interest and attention are

attracted" [22] page 8. Appropriate task gradation, and task sequencing can contribute to achieving such an impact.

Moreover, teachers play a determining role in deciding about the criteria for grading and sequencing tasks. Reference [23] considers the teacher as a leading factor in the successful implementation of curriculum changes. Furthermore, he states:

Teachers may vary according to language proficiency, teaching experience, skill and expertise, training and qualifications, morale and motivation, teaching style, and beliefs and principles. The attitudes of the teachers and their abilities to adjust to new thinking and what it involves in practical terms are crucial (page 99).

Such teacher-related factors should be considered in choosing criteria for grading and sequencing tasks. In the following section, we will discuss how various features of students and teachers will influence choice of criteria for grading and sequencing tasks in task-based syllabus.

1. Motivation

A constructivist view of motivation places emphasis on social context as well as individual personal choices [24] page 120. Each person is motivated differently, and will therefore act on his or her environment in ways that are unique [25]. This implies that there can be learners who are motivated by the language itself. Such learners enjoy learning the grammatical rules of the language. Using linguistic complexity as the criterion for task gradation, and task sequencing seems to be congruent with their motivation. Moreover, there might be learners who enjoy accomplishing cognitive tasks. Such cognitively-motivated learners will have a preference for cognitive complexity as the criterion for task gradation, and sequencing. And finally we may expect some other learners to be socially motivated in the sense that they are motivated by their desire to interact with others. For such learners, the dialogical approach to task complexity constitutes a more logical foundation for grading and sequencing tasks.

2. Views about SLA

Views that teachers and learners have about language and language learning need to be taken into account in choosing criteria for grading and sequencing tasks. Materials obviously reflect the writers' views of language and learning, and teachers will respond according to how well these match their own beliefs and expectations [20]. Teachers and learners may prioritize linguistic complexity, cognitive complexity or frequency of task occurrence as criteria for grading and sequencing tasks depending on whether they advocate a linguistic, cognitive, or dialogical view of language learning.

3. Attitude

Reference [26] states that "Attitudes are one's evaluative responses to a person, place, thing or an event" page 38. The importance of attitude in SLA is undeniable. Reference [27] maintains that learners lacking optimal attitudes for second language acquisition will tend to seek less input.

Reference [22] states that in order for the learners to maximize their exposure to language in use, they need to be engaged both affectively and cognitively in the language experience. Similarly, [24] argues that emotions must be considered an essential part of learning" page 28. This indicates that learners' emotions including their attitudes need to be taken into account in choosing criteria for grading and sequencing tasks in task-based syllabus.

Materials should take into account that learners differ in affective attitudes by providing choices of different types of texts, types of activities, optional extra [22] page 19. The learners' and teachers' attitude toward language as a set of rules, their attitude toward cognitive activities, and their attitude toward receiving assistance from others can play a significant role in making decisions about what criterion to choose for grading and sequencing tasks in task-based second language syllabus.

There may be learners who are not at ease with cognitive activities. As [22] puts it, "Materials should help learners to feel at ease" page 9. If, for example, learners do not feel comfortable with cognitive complexity in tasks, the criterion of cognitive complexity is not the right factor used to grade and sequence tasks. Therefore, in choosing criteria for grading and sequencing tasks, we need to discover what criteria make the learners feel at ease and choose the criteria accordingly.

As [4] argues, the amount of assistance the learner can get from the teacher, the classmates, or other resources has a role to play in determining task complexity. Individualistic learners who prefer to learn on their own will disapprove of tasks which involve the mediating role of the teacher or more capable learners. This indicates that the dialogical approach to task gradation will not fit such learners' attitudes. Using linguistics and cognitive criteria for task gradation and task sequencing seems more appropriate for such learners.

4. Learning style

Deep processing of intake is required if effective and durable learning is to take place [28]. Deep processing is determined by the learners learning style. Reference [29] takes an even broader perspective. They state that individual learners have a composite of at least 20 style dimensions, of which eight seem to be particularly important for L2 learning: global vs. analytic; field dependent vs. field independent; feeling vs. thinking; impulsive vs. reflective; intuitive-random vs. concrete-sequential; closure-oriented vs. open; extroverted vs. introverted; visual vs. auditory vs. hands-on (or tactile/kinesthetic).

As [30] argues, teachers must pay attention to different learning styles. The pedagogic response to learning style is to allow in a principled way for variety specially in content and language skills and to build in suggestions for variability in pacing- the speed with which learners are able to work through materials. Along the same line, [22] maintains that materials should take into account that learners differ in learning styles, which means that activities should be variable and should cater for all learning styles. For instance, [31]

states that tasks involving cognitive activities will not suit all learners. This indicates that learners' learning style should not be ignored in deciding about the criteria for grading and sequencing tasks.

5. Intelligence

Concerning multiple intelligences, as proposed by [32], people differ in terms of intelligences. Not the same task gradation and sequencing criterion can be applied in teaching different learners with differing intelligence types such as verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, and interpersonal intelligences. Teachers may apply linguistic complexity, psycholinguistic complexity, and dialogical issues respectively in dealing with learners with verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, and interpersonal intelligences.

6. Age

Moreover, tasks can be graded, and sequenced based on conceptual development. As [14] argues, based on conceptual development in childhood, we may increase the cognitive demand of tasks in language instruction. For instance, tasks involving the Here-and-Now should precede tasks involving the There-and-Then. Moreover, [7] posits that tasks imposing a dual demand on the learner are more complex than tasks with a single demand. Tasks involving high levels of conceptual complexity are more appropriate for learners at higher levels of cognitive development. In other words, cognitive complexity seems to be a better criterion for grading and sequencing tasks for learners who are, to use Piaget's classification, at formal operational stage of cognitive development. Piaget believes that, at this stage, people are capable of abstract thought [33]. Learners at lower levels of cognitive development are in need of, to use Vygotsky's ideas, mediation from more knowledgeable people [33]. This indicates that such learners can benefit more from a dialogical approach to task gradation, and task sequencing.

B. Educational Factors

Philosophy in general and educational philosophy in particular influences educational systems. Reference [34] classifies philosophies underlying education into four main groups affecting curriculum: Perrenialism emphasizes classical subjects and literary analysis; essentialism emphasizes intellectual growth. Progressivism and reconstructionism, based on pragmatism, aim at democratic social living and reconstructing society respectively. They both consider teachers as guides and leaders.

It can be argued that educational systems based on perrenialism may grade, and sequence tasks on the basis of linguistic variables. Likewise, essentialism, with its emphasis on intellectual growth, may lead to prioritizing psycholinguistic variables. Educational systems based on progressivism and reconstructionism, with their emphasis on social aspects, may give priority to dialogical issues in grading and sequencing tasks.

C. Cultural Factors

Intelligence as defined by [32] is "biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture'' pages 33–34. Reference [35] suggests that these intelligences grow independently from each other and that they are influenced by cultural factors to the point that cultures determine the type of intelligence to be fostered in a society. References [36] and [37] are of the idea that teaching activities used in a curriculum are teachers' educational philosophies and teaching styles. In this regard, [36] claims, only verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences are dealt with in schools to the negligence of other types of intelligences. In terms of task gradation, and sequencing, this may imply that linguistic complexity and psycholinguistic variables are mainly focused on.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is often argued that, in lockstep classes, learners are unrealistically assumed to learn what teachers choose to teach them, leaving no room for individual differences. We can, however, make a distinction between overt behavior – what learners appear to be doing — and covert learning processes that are not easy to observe directly [30].

Reference [6] contends that "no syllabus of generalized tasks can identify or anticipate all the sources of challenge to particular learners" page 89. In the same vein, [5] contends that "grading tasks cannot follow a precise algorithmic procedure but rather must proceed more intuitively in accordance with a general assessment of task complexity" page 227. These contentions are in line with the argument put forth by [1] concerning the significance of judgments of the classroom teacher. In a nutshell, it can be argued that grading, and sequencing tasks call for what [10] calls "teachers sense of plausibility" page 172. However, to come up with a better grading, and sequencing of tasks, teachers and other stakeholders should take into account the learners' characteristics as well as educational and cultural issues, and select the criterion for task gradation, and task sequencing accordingly.

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