Systemization in Foreign Language Teaching

Monitoring Content Progression

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The possibility of presenting content systematically is certainly the most important factor in compensating for the lack of a natural situation in foreign language learning.

<div align="right">J. A. Van Ek, 1970</div>

Contents

Figures

Preface

In 1983 Belgian publisher Van In asked me to write a French textbook for the upper years of high school in Flanders—the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The book was intended for 11th grade students who had been learning French as a foreign language for at least four years in non-intensive programs a few hours a week.

I felt confident I would be able to produce such a textbook. I had taught at those levels, I was involved in didactic research, and for a decade I had been responsible for training high school French teachers. But from the first moments of planning, I was confronted with a major question that, surprisingly, had never occurred to me: what *content* do students master (or are supposed to master) by the end of the 10th grade, content that should be reviewed in communicative applications in the 11th grade and that should form the basis for further expansion? How was this new textbook going to connect with a proper vertical articulation over the years?

The intention, indeed, was not to support learning on advanced levels for motivated university students. We were dealing with slow curricular progression in high schools—two to three 50-minute lessons a week given to adolescents caught between competing disciplines and who were, overall, not too motivated. The thin spreading of the learning process made systematic review of previously learned material necessary. But what had they learned? What should the textbook review?

I expected the textbooks used in those previous years to provide the answer to these questions. After all, the concepts of grading and sequencing in language learning materials had been around for decades. But it became quickly obvious that only during the first year, or sometimes the first two, was language content more or less well identified. Then disorder set in. In the third and fourth years of language learning (9th and 10th grades) textbooks did not link up with preceding volumes, not even if they belonged to the same series. Cumulative lexicons at the end of each book were lacking or did not reflect what had been covered previously. We were in the mid-1980s—the heyday of functional-notional approaches—so I asked teachers if they could provide me with an overview of functions and notions that

had been implemented over the years. I made the same request to textbook authors. None was able to comply.

It did not make sense to start analyzing and cataloging all the material in the textbooks previously used. First, there were various series in use, each with different content, so that a homogeneous summation at the end of the 10th grade, valid for all students in Flanders, was not possible. Second, some teachers did not follow their textbooks as planned. Some teachers replaced certain parts with copies of newspaper or journal articles, showed films, listened to songs, had free discussions, etc. Only later would my research into systemization reveal that this problem was reasonably solvable.

I wondered about responsible lexical selection and cumulative integration over the whole school program. I set up a few limited experiments to measure one aspect of content progression over the years (i.e., the mastery of vocabulary in communicative contexts), at the end of the 9th grade and at the end of the 12th grade. It turned out that students knew less French productively—and sometimes much less—at the end of their high school study than they had three years earlier. Students were actually *losing* what they had learned in previous years. The main reason was that in the upper years the lessons, already time-limited, mainly consisted of freewheeling activities. Teachers spent little or no time on identifying and reviewing previously learned material (Decoo 1988).

I had to admit that in teaching and in training teachers, I had not dealt with this aspect of content progression and reiteration. Teacher training mainly concentrated on ad hoc classroom strategies, interaction, the use of media, evaluation techniques, etc. To be sure, content received some attention but not as a tangible continuum. Rather, I touched upon content in the form of samples and of model lessons. For teachers' in-classroom training, students were encouraged to find an interesting article or a song to present to their class, without any consideration about how this activity fit into a sustained program of language progression and reinforced previously learned material.

In view of the scope of the problem, I told the publishing company that I would be unable to make an efficient textbook in those circumstances. Without knowing the precise content base at the end of the 10th grade, I felt that a new textbook for the following year, with material taken at random, would only perpetuate a problematic situation.

The idea then emerged to develop a completely new series of textbooks from the very first lesson on, which would meticulously select content and effectively expand it, book after book, year after year, constantly reiterating all that had been learned within a framework of varied communicative strategies. With the assistance of a group of teacher-authors, I set out on that adventure. The group started on the level of groping apprenticeship. The first book, the experimental edition of *Éventail 1*, came out in 1984. Our prime concern with progression, continuity, reiteration, and deeper

integration next led to the production of other sustaining publications, such as thematic lexicons for revision and training, and to graded readers, matching the levels the students had attained.

The acceptance of the approach was surprising, considering the normally slow and prudent conversion to new language textbooks in Flanders. Four years later, in 1988, 70 percent of the 900 Flemish secondary schools had adopted *Éventail* in spite of opposition from some officials in the educational system (who, I should add, had a stake in competing textbooks). We then developed, on the same principle of monitored progression, a French textbook for the elementary school (two volumes of *Éventail-Junior* for the fifth and sixth grades), which within a few years had been adopted by 80 percent of the 2,200 Flemish elementary schools. Further-related material was also produced—accompanying graded readers and thematic lexicons for different levels, pedagogical grammars, listening material, communicative tests, educational software, etc.

In the 1990s a team of teachers wrote a series for professional education based on the same principles as those in *Éventail* (*Éventail-TSO*), while another team produced a series for business sections in senior high school (*Carte de visite*). Some of the series and related material were adapted for use in a few East European countries, including a major development in Russia as part of a cooperation agreement between the Russian and Flemish ministries of education. In 1997 we began *Arcades*, a new series to replace *Éventail*. At this point, my colleagues and I not only had more experience, research background, and better instruments but also had developed more nuanced approaches in areas where we had been too radical. Two new series, called *Arcades Réseau* and *En Action*, were started in more recent years.

According to user feedback, important reasons for their satisfaction in the textbooks were the "certainty and clarity," and the deep integration that content systemization provided non-intensive programs in a regular school environment. Teachers in different grades felt that they were now working toward common long-term goals to which all their small efforts contributed. Perhaps as important: systemization did not compel teachers to use a certain, strict method. Teachers could vary in their approaches, a point that is explained and suggested in the instructor's manuals.

Of course, neither the wide distribution of the approach nor the overall positive feedback constitute proof for greater effectiveness and higher achievements compared to other approaches. Circumstances did not permit us to set up comparative studies. Moreover, the history of such comparisons shows how unconvincing they remain because of the complexity of the variables. Still, the whole endeavor to systemize expanding content seemed to answer an evident need.

For this book it seemed worthwhile to look back and share what I have learned from these textbook projects. Indeed, much literature on language learning and syllabus design is devoted to what ought to be, sometimes

based on small-scale experiments, while what has been tried out over longer periods for large groups is rarely used as a source for reflection and description. This work on content systemization is based on some 25 years of my experience with textbook development. The insights have come from experimentation and practice, from trial and error, from positive and negative criticisms related to the development, and from the actual use of these textbooks by a few million learners in several countries. In other words, my colleagues and I have tried out the principles in real-world applications and have received massive feedback from the field that allowed us to refine hypotheses, to develop improved products, and to diversify the offerings, in a cyclic, dialectic movement between research and implementation. Year after year, that feedback continues to come from inquiries and interviews.

However, this book aims at much more than a simple survey of experiences from a project. I also describe the theoretical and historical background for the concept of systemization, within the broader framework of language-teaching methods. It constitutes a reflection of my research over many years. Most of my research has been published in Dutch and in French. I am grateful for the opportunity to reach a wider audience with this book.

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Acknowledgments

1   Introduction

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter starts by referring to a number of authorities, both past and present, who have called attention to the importance of organized content for language teaching. Next, to make things immediately concrete, I give a brief description of what computer-assisted systemization of content can entail. It is followed by concrete examples of applications, which are treated in more detail in subsequent chapters. With that practical background, it is easier to understand the section on the intended audience and the objectives of this book. I further clarify the broader framework, of which systemization of content is only one facet. The chapter concludes with an outline of the various chapters of this book.

1.1   WHAT OTHERS SAID

This section, meant as an appetizer, wants to point out how strongly pedagogues have emphasized the need for systemization of content in language teaching—or at least the principle of calculated progression. A brief historical overview of *how* this has been tried is studied in Chapter 3. Here I will only mention examples from a wide array of statements.

1.1.1   In Years Past

In the seventeenth century, the prominent pedagogue John Amos Comenius, who developed language textbooks used all over Europe for some 200 years, stated: "Let us teach and learn: the few before the many; the short before the long; the simple before the complex; the general before the particular; the nearer before the more remote; the regular before the irregular" (1648, cited in Jelinek 1953, p. 123).

Claude Marcel, acclaimed by Howatt (2004) for his "complex and carefully thought-out methodology of language teaching" (p. 171), wrote in 1853:

> The principles of subdivision and gradation, by concentrating the power of the mind on one thing at a time, are most powerful in instruction (. . .): a rational method of learning languages, in conformity with these principles, ought to indicate the successive operations which are necessary at the different stages of the acquisition, so that each may suitably prepare for that which follows, and that all may gradually concur to the end proposed. (p. 201)

In 1904, Otto Jespersen, a key figure of the Reform movement in language teaching, posits that "there must be gradual progress in difficulty, that is, the material for instruction must be arranged in stages from very easy to more and more difficult things" (p. 14).

Harold Palmer, in his groundbreaking *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (1917), asserts:

> What we can do, however, to ensure gradation on sound and salutary lines is to regulate the quantity of units in accordance with the capacities of the average student, to work from the easier to the more difficult forms of expression, to select the more used in preference to the less used ergons, and to avoid abrupt transitions. (p. 121)

William F. Mackey, who produced one of the most thorough studies on language learning in the twentieth century, devotes two chapters to the selection and gradation of linguistic elements in order to create progressive courses: "Selection is an inherent characteristic of all methods. Since it is impossible to teach the whole of a language, all methods must in some way or other, whether intentionally or not, select the part of it they intend to teach" (1965, p. 161). Mackey's selection criteria include frequency, range, availability, coverage, and learnability.

1.1.2   A Plea Since the 1970s

The injunction by Anton (1970) that "there must be acceptance of a curricular continuum, which will serve as a basic guideline for language instruction from the earliest level of study through the teacher-training program" (p. 18) has been repeated over and over since the 1970s.

In his introduction to Robert Galisson's "systematic vocabulary learning" (1970), Francis Debyser reminds the readers that "the lexicon, even if it is limitless, obeys laws of structural organization." It is the "knowledge of those laws that allows the organization of systematic teaching" (p. 5, transl.). Galisson's work itself focuses on the phase beyond the already well-systemized 3,000 words of the *français fondamental* to show that even in those richer lexical environments systemization for calculated progression is feasible.

The quotation by Jan Van Ek (1970) that serves as this book's epigraph posits the didactic principle of systemization for language teaching in relation to natural acquisition: "The possibility of presenting content systematically is certainly the most important factor in compensating for the lack of a natural situation in foreign language learning" (p. 17). Van Ek is one of the founders of the vast European movement of the past decades toward delineating language learning as a progressive system that can be structured into levels to be filled with adequate content for each stage and evaluated through assessment of the learners. That European movement quickly triggered courses and textbooks claiming to follow the new principles. But in his *Communicative Syllabus Design*, John Munby (1978) remarks critically:

> A look at many of the resultant courses and materials prompts the vital question: what system (if any) is being used to arrive at the specification of the English deemed appropriate for different purposes? If it does not exist, there is clearly a need for a model that takes account of all the potentially significant variables and systematically applies them to achieve an appropriate specification. (pp. 1–2)

Munby's warning did not have much effect. Ten years later, Denis Girard, Janine Courtillon, Brian Page, and René Richterich—also key figures for language learning developments promoted by the Council of Europe—found it necessary to correct a mistaken interpretation of the European threshold movement. In their assessment of the implementation of that movement from the early 1970s on, they state:

> The threshold levels, based on terminal objectives, may have given the impression that the pedagogic concept of sequencing was obsolete, the only criterion being to satisfy on the spot the language needs elicited by a topic or a setting. But one ran the risk, in simply reacting haphazardly to situations and topics, of greatly complicating the task of the learner one believed one was helping. (Girard et al. 1988, p. 42)

The rest of their book, aptly called *Selection and Distribution of Contents in Language Syllabuses*, is one plea for gradual systemization. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) itself asserts:

> Learning which takes place over a period of time needs to be organised into units which take account of progression and can provide continuity. Syllabuses and materials need to be situated in relation to one another. A framework of levels may help in this process. Learning efforts in relation to those objectives and those units need also to be situated on this vertical dimension of progress, i.e., assessed in relation to gains in proficiency. (p. 16)

Lange (1997) calls curricular articulation for second language teaching "a moral imperative" (p. 41) and defines it as "the interrelation and continuity of contents, curriculum, instruction, and evaluation, with the focus of all aspects on the progress of the learner toward comprehending and communicating in a second language" (p. 31). Barrette and Paesani (2005) devoted a reader to the importance of language program articulation. Steinhart (2006) pleads for "courses that are linked so as to make up articulated programs, and that of students experiencing coherence as a facilitative and supporting structure for their own learning" (p. 259). Rifkin (2006) attributes the failure of language programs to reach advanced-level skills to the lack of sequential curricular planning and proposes that "the well-articulated language curriculum should build learning tasks one upon the other as students reach toward ever greater language accomplishments" (p. 263). Harden (2006) draws attention to the gap between institutional instruction and learners' expectations from the perspective of progression. Progression, indeed, is a complex concept greatly influenced by the collective experience of the classroom as well as by individual variables, as Harden and Witte (2006) also stress.

This perspective of planned selection and progression is not limited to the discrete elements of grammar and vocabulary. It pertains to all relevant aspects of language learning. It thus ties in with the concept of "pedagogical norms" as stated by Bardovi-Harlig and Gass (2002):

> Grounded in both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic principles, pedagogical norms guide the selection and sequencing of target language features for language teaching and learning. Such selection principles are more important than ever today as language teachers and material developers strive to incorporate an increasing number of varied aspects of language into the curriculum and to deliver it to a widening range of students. (p. 1)

Mishan (2005) remarks that the "recent books in the area, notably Byrd 1995, Tomlinson 1998, and McGrath 2002, are all geared towards redressing the lack of a systematic approach to materials design and evaluation" (p. x).

Swan (2005), who takes issue with some tenets of task-based instruction, insists on the situation of the vast majority of language learners, i.e., adolescents in non-intensive school programs—the "3hpw learners" (three hours per week). These students need an approach that guarantees a balanced coverage of content over the years: "in such contexts there is a powerful case for proactive teaching incorporating formal syllabuses" (p. 378). Swan further asserts:

> The claim that "traditional" approaches have failed is not well founded, and frequently involves misrepresentation of the approaches in question.

> The naturalistic communication-driven pedagogy characteristic of TBI [task-based instruction] has serious limitations, especially as regards the systematic teaching of new linguistic material. Its exclusive use is particularly unsuitable for exposure-poor contexts where time is limited—that is to say, for most of the world's language learners. (pp. 396–397)

Finally, language testing is an area that has shown great concern for systemization, in particular for achievement testing, where learners are to be assessed in the course of their actual progression.

Of course, there are also critics of systemized language teaching, particularly when linguistic criteria determine the sequencing. Indeed, in the minds of some, systemized content conjures up predetermined listings of "words and grammar," which are then also presented as some kind of non-communicative cramming of discrete elements. The definition of content, as used in this book, will clarify that perception. Moreover, few of the opponents to planned sequencing seem to realize that any alternative also requires systemization. It was easy to state that

> it is necessary only that the material be presented in contexts representative of actual speech and that it be meaningful to the students. (. . .) It is an advantage that choice of course materials does not depend upon word counts and structure counts that are frequently innaccurate [*sic*]. If a situation is accurately defined, the vocabulary and syntax within it must be appropriate to teach. (Hauptman 1971, pp. 236–237)

But how do authors or teachers ensure that contexts are representative and that situations are accurately defined? If the choice of situations is to be dictated by other-than-linguistic criteria, like the immediate needs of students to be met by authentic sources, the correct determination of those needs and the choice of relevant sources to answer those needs require some form of systemization. And how to ensure that what has been brought up "spontaneously" will be reiterated adequately later on for deeper integration? At various places in this book I therefore include the process-based (or task-based) approach as recipient of the advantages of systemization.

1.2   A HELPFUL INSTRUMENT: A RELATIONAL DATABASE

Before clarifying the intended audience and the objectives of this book, I believe it is useful to give a brief description of what computer-assisted systemization of content can entail. It will make things concrete from the onset and point ahead to the practical chapters at the end of this book.

I start from the premise that as syllabus designers, textbook authors, or teachers we want to have a better grip on the content with which learners

have been, will be, or may be confronted. One instrument for achieving this purpose is a relational database, which is basically a table consisting of a set of rows and columns. One that is easy to use, and already on any computer that has Microsoft Office, is Access. It does not require any expertise to operate on a basic level. Its primary use is to enter data, which can then be processed in a variety of ways.

For our purpose, each row represents an item of content. The various columns on the row identify traits of that item, such as the lexical item in the target language, a translation to the mother tongue, the word class, the semantic field, the location (unit or chapter) where it is introduced in a textbook, and a salient sample sentence as "exponent." All these categories are explained in detail in Chapter 7.

See for an example with minimal traits Figure 1.1.

Other columns for various traits can be added, making the database as rich as one would want for various purposes. A relational database not only keeps track of content entered but allows the user to classify and select data at will. Examples are an alphabetical list of all items taught during a certain month; a thematic overview of all items from (part of) a textbook or a frequency list; adjectives expressing emotions studied up to a certain level; nouns with a peculiar morphological anomaly; words and structures useful for a visit to the doctor; expressions for the function "to apologize"; or cultural data such as artists and works mentioned since the beginning of the course.

Other instruments that can also be tied to the database perform such tasks as scanning authentic texts to compare with selections in the database, making a concordance of sources used in class, or checking on how accurately items are reused for sufficient reiteration in texts and exercises during a course. Such possibilities are occasionally mentioned in this book.

1.3   PREVIEW: EXAMPLES OF APPLICATIONS

The following examples illustrate what computer-assisted systemization can do, ranging from simple and obvious cases to the broader and more demanding. The "user" in these examples can be a textbook author or a teacher, depending on the situation.

1.   *Review former vocabulary thematically.* Many words and structures formerly learned do not reappear later unless properly planned. Students are now in their third year. The user wants a weekly review of these items so that all are refreshed at least twice during the whole third year. For each review, words and structures are to be grouped thematically, each with a sample sentence with Cloze.

The database can immediately provide such a structured list of groups of items. The user spreads these groups over the available weeks and defines the evaluation criteria.

A	French	English	Class	Sem	Loc	Exponent with Cloze
une	demande	a request, an application	2	434	11.3	Pour visiter cette église, il faut d'abord faire une d... .
	actuellement	at the moment, at present	61	24	21.8	Hier la situation était grave. Mais ac... elle s'améliore.
	valoir: Il vaudrait mieux que	It would be better if	9	104	20.12	Ne restez pas ici. Il vaudrait m... q... vous partiez.
	bon: À quoi bon?	What's the use?	721	446	23.12	Je ne veux plus essayer! Ça ne va pas. ... q... b... ?

Figure 1.1   Simple relational database with minimal traits.

2. *Prepare a conversation.* Many communicative textbooks foresee assignments such as "Call the airline and reconfirm a reservation" or "Check the time of departure, required papers, luggage limits, etc." It can also be part of the pretask in task-based learning. It is helpful if students can first review the relevant words and structures previously learned. The same approach is valid when something that happened unexpectedly would form a good topic for conversation in class. To prepare for this conversation as effectively as possible, the teacher would need a quick overview of relevant vocabulary, subdivided in two groups: words previously encountered and those not yet encountered. Students can first take a few minutes to prepare for the conversation.

On the basis of a few semantic codes (or by entering key words related to the topic), the database gives all relevant words and structures previously learned, including sample sentences for contextual use. Words not yet encountered but interesting for the topic can also be selected and given to students with the translation and a sample sentence.

3. *Focus on forms.* As a teacher I use a communicative approach in a third-semester Spanish course. At regular intervals, I conduct a "focus on forms" to clarify grammar (e.g., better mastery of the verbal forms

of the type *abrir* in the main tenses). The textbook offers only a chart and a minimal exercise. But the students need more practice with all of the verbs of that type encountered since the first semester and in familiar contexts for communication. Such periodic sessions of "focus on forms" would also be good for lexical rehearsal of these verbs.

The database instantly delivers the list of these verbs, together with salient sample sentences for each. If the course material is electronically available, a concordancer can also give the sentences in which the verb forms appeared earlier in our textbook and, if wanted, in the textbook(s) of previous semesters. With those or similar sentences, the user can easily compose, e.g., contextual Cloze-exercises.

4. *Review specific structures.* In an advanced German course, the user wants, for contrastive practice, to list all encountered uses of the structure *eines Tages*, such as in *Es ist eines Tages letzten Monat passiert. Es wird eines Tages nächsten Monat passieren. Ich komme eines Tages.*

The database provides these examples from the list of sample sentences. Or the user can assemble such examples by using a concordancer that scans the electronic version of class materials.

5. *Assess an authentic source.* As a teacher I use a conventional textbook, with all the steps laid out. From time to time I want to supplement the material with an Internet article, a song from the charts, or a film clip. But its language level must be manageable for students—no more than 5 percent unknown elements. I also want to know which yet-unknown elements are valuable for the students to retain because they appear later in the textbook.

If the text of the source is not too long and if the teacher knows the textbook fairly well, the comparison with the database can be done manually by a simple search for each questionable item or a few students can be asked to underline "unknown" items, which can then be checked in the database. The database shows if the item has been studied before or not. If not, it will show if and when the course will introduce that item.

In the case of longer texts or insufficient familiarity with the textbook, teachers may proceed to corpus comparison, as is done in the preparation of graded readers.

6. *Select items for pronunciation practice.* During a first year of French course, the user wants to give the students some pronunciation practice on the difference between [e] and [ɛ]. To that end, a list of words recently learned is needed, containing those sounds. Moreover, the words must be selected from a few specific semantic fields in order to practice them in limited communicative contexts.

The database can provide this list at once and exactly to the point where students are in the textbook, including sample sentences for contextual use.

7.   *Select items for spelling practice.* In a second-year ESL course, students ask for some extra practice for the spelling of the English [u], in words such as *grew*, *shoe*, *through*, *flu*, *two*, *who*.

The database gives all relevant words previously (or just recently) learned with the required characteristics, including sample sentences for contextual use.

8.   *Select rhymes.* For a creative, collaborative task, the teacher has the students write poems with rhymes. As much as possible, students should use words more recently learned.

The database gives us the words learned during a defined period, alphabetically classified per rhyme, with the most recently learned words on top in every rhyme group.

9.   *Help a transfer student.* A student enters into an ongoing program (either at the beginning of a new semester or during the semester). He/she has had a similar number of foreign language hours but with a different textbook, which means significant content discrepancies. The teacher wants to identify possible lacunae and provide efficient remedial help.

If the material of the formerly used textbook(s) is also identified in the database, we can generate the words and structures (with sample sentences) that a student has not yet learned and should start working on so that he/she can follow with ease in the new program. If that material is not identified, the student can be given the lexical list (e.g., thematically grouped with sample sentences) of what has been learned up to his/her point of entry into the new program. He/she can then concentrate on lacunae and review items over a period of several weeks.

10. *Check textbook continuity.* In a progressive approach, textbooks within one series for subsequent years are assumed to build up content systematically, but in reality such organization is often inadequate. Moving to a textbook from a different series in a subsequent year usually implies major discrepancies: the book assumes the students already know certain material, but the students never encountered it previously, or the textbook presents other material as new although it has already been covered. The latter can be seen as useful review but the former can create problems, especially for weaker students.

If the material from the various textbooks has been codified in the database (even if it is limited only to the lexicon), it just takes a minute

to obtain an overview of the discrepancies. Items that students are supposed to know at the beginning of the new textbook (or up to any unit in that book) but that are unfamiliar to the students can be identified and structured into one or more remedial units. The teacher can cover those during the first days or weeks of the course (if only for receptive assessment at this point), while work with the new textbook can start simultaneously.

11. *Develop a textbook*. Any experienced textbook writer knows how important it is to have a clear, complete, and structured view of all the material that the book is supposed to cover, as well as a follow-up system that tracks what has been used and how it is being recycled through the textbook.

The database functions as a dynamic syllabus, providing overviews and desired selections. As the writing of the textbook progresses, the database serves to keep track of the material entered, allowing the author to monitor recycling. For any kind of practice forms, the database helps to select the most relevant items, as mentioned in previous examples.

12. *Assess or produce graded readers*. Simplified texts are recognized as beneficial for language learners. They are usually presented in grades and often expressed in number of words: a level of 1,000 words, a level of 2,000 words, etc. However, in most cases, this vocabulary matches only partially what specific students have learned in their program. The differences can be quite large, given the major discrepancies between textbooks, even at elementary levels.

The database makes it possible to assess existing graded readers as to their measure of discrepancy with a textbook level, and, if necessary, to provide proper remedial vocabulary lists to ensure smoother reading. Moreover, the database is a powerful instrument to help in the production of graded readers that reflect the learners' progress more precisely. This approach also allows the control of the ratio of unknown words for the application of reading strategies.

13. *Monitor a process-based course*. The students in this class, a small group of motivated adults, can decide for themselves what the daily content will be and negotiate the process with the teacher. Any topic, any situation, any document can be brought up. On the spot the teacher helps with what is needed, and students work as well as possible with the content as it is discovered or provided.

A database can help in various ways. It can immediately suggest or supplement appropriate content for the topic or situation that students have proposed. During or after each session, it can be used to record what the students decide should be remembered. Those elements will be rehearsed at later times and, if foreseen, used for testing. After some

70 percent of the course has passed, the database can signal gaps that need to be covered. Indeed, experience with process-based courses reveals that large chunks of elementary vocabulary and structures are never brought up without some monitoring of content.

1.4 INTENDED AUDIENCE

Who could benefit from such an approach?

- In the first place, obvious beneficiaries are authors of syllabuses or textbooks, whatever approach or method they favor, as long as they are sensitive to issues of content progression. Systemization starts in the initial stages of language learning. If one keeps up with the effort of filling the database, the system can continue to serve up to the highest levels, in particular to overcome the notorious breach between the elementary and the advanced levels.
- Language teachers can benefit as well. This book can help them become more conscious of the dimension of progressive content in the classroom and the positive impact of content systemization on students' learning. If they are willing to start a database with the material in their textbook, they can generate various applications to improve the learning process, as described in Chapters 7 to 9 in this book.
- Officials in the educational system, in particular developers of standards and curricula, will gain greater understanding of the function and importance of progressive content for long-term goals, expressed in more quantifiable ways.
- Researchers in aspects of foreign language learning can become more aware of the variable that content can constitute in experimental research, in particular in assessing learner performance.

1.5 CLARIFICATIONS

Placing content for language learning at the center of a book could easily be misunderstood. A few clarifications should avert the narrow impression that content systemization is some kind of predetermined buildup of words and structures in a so-called strictly structural approach. Content is only one facet, albeit an important one, in a complex process that can follow various roads.

1.5.1 From the Viewpoint of Teaching

First, this book does not define which content ought to be presented in a language course, though it indicates sources and criteria for selection. It

studies the reasons why content systemization, as such, is important; it analyzes the framework in which selection and organization of content is possible; and it describes ways in which content can be defined, codified, structured, and implemented. The precise determination and organization of content for a specific approach is the duty of those responsible for instruction. Even so, content systemization is not meant to narrow language learning to a rigid package of things to be taught. It should help the syllabus designer, textbook author, or teacher reflect on the nature and place of content in language learning in order to determine an efficient middle ground between foreseen progression and limitless emancipation. Whatever the content chosen, systemization provides stronger possibilities of reviewing and recycling previously studied material in effective ways, guaranteeing enhanced concentric progression. It also offers the possibility of identifying and monitoring the unanticipated items that spring from immediate communicative needs.

Second, this book advocates neither a certain type of syllabus design nor a specific method for teaching/learning a foreign language. Resistance to systemization sometimes stems from distrust of imposed systems. Systemization of content, as I hope to make clear, can serve viewpoints on syllabus or textbook design that diverge markedly from each other. It can serve a broad range of methods, from one that closely follows predetermined texts to one that deliberately rejects any form of pedagogical selection and organization of language materials. Even in the latter case, what is being effectively handled in class deserves capture and registration for reuse and testing purposes. An underlying concept of this book is, indeed, that it does not matter which method you follow as long as from the onset you keep track of what has been taught to the students or discovered by them on their own.

In that sense, systemization does not necessarily imply a linearity that accumulates previously determined material step-by-step—an approach that Van Lier (1996) and Zappen-Thomson (2006), among others, have warned about. Systemization can be useful even for the learner-constructed model Laoire proposes (Laoire 2006). Indeed, without some local management, and therefore some recording and subsequent recycling, such a learner-oriented model could result in disorganized learning, particularly in non-intensive courses and weaker students.

However, the fact that content systemization can be useful for various approaches does not mean I don't have any pedagogical preferences according to the learning situation. Those preferences have grown out of years of language-teaching experience in divergent situations, complemented by the demands of textbook writing and enriched by feedback from classroom teachers. It is likely that my pedagogical preferences become visible at various points, particularly when it comes to systemization for textbooks in school-bound, non-intensive courses.

1.5.2 From the Viewpoint of Learning

The following nuances can be observed:

First, language learning is much more than being faced with pedagogically selected and organized content and somehow managing to assimilate it. As Reibel (1969) expressed it: "The learner's proficiency in the target language, like that of the native speaker, is not just the linear, additive sum of all the language parts he knows" (p. 291). A learner's progression is also largely dependent on personal variables such as motivation, personal involvement, persistence, and time invested. Progression involves growth in confidence, in risk taking, and in autonomy—including the strategies required to foster these traits. At the same time, however, content systemization can be a sustaining factor for those personal traits. It provides a sustained view about what students have learned and what students need reviewed, together with a calculated concentric expansion of language proficiency. Such a view of progression made can promote the positive traits just mentioned and can help in developing strategies in a more orderly fashion.

Second, progression in content, inasmuch as we can identify, quantify, and order language material, does not mean that all learners follow that same path similarly. Even if material is presented in the same order to a group of students, after each lesson, and certainly after each longer period, they will differ among themselves in terms of individual achievement. One student will not have integrated some material at all, another will be able to recognize some material only receptively, while yet another will already be well ahead. Each student thus evolves in a dynamic interaction with previously learned material, manifesting varying degrees of intake and integration, of automatization and fluency—a diversity studied by, e.g., Meara (1984), Nation (1990), and Schmitt (1998). Stating that learners have reached the level of 5,000 words, for example, should be understood as a general indication of the common goal, not as the exact figure each student has achieved. At the same time, however, content systemization can provide the weaker students with the instruments to better keep up with others or to remedy weaknesses more efficiently. These aspects are handled as part of the functions of systemization in Chapter 6.

The conclusion is that methodological nuances and individual variations and discrepancies cannot be used as excuses for not trying to manage content in a systematic way.

1.6 OUTLINE

After this introductory chapter, Chapters 2 through 6 draw a more theoretical framework for the concept of systemization.

- Chapter 2 deals with terminology and conceptual orientation. It answers the questions: What is to be understood by content, method, and other frequently used terms? To what extent do variables affect the application realm of content systemization?
- Chapter 3 looks at content systemization from a historical perspective to see what major efforts have been made—even as long ago as in the Middle Ages—to select and organize content for language learning.
- Chapter 4 studies in greater detail one of the most comprehensive attempts to systemization to date: the Council of Europe's approaches.
- Chapter 5 focuses on vocabulary as providing inevitable basic units for content systemization, even if the organizational principles are not lexical.
- Chapter 6 describes the possible functions of systemization: What are the advantages of identifying and trailing content progression?

Chapters 7 through 9 are more practical and deal with suggestions for implementation based on experience gained from years of working with databases and with correlated learning programs.

- Chapter 7 discusses the possibilities of defining and codifying content in a relational database, which becomes a dynamic instrument for monitoring content in various dimensions.
- Chapter 8 shows how such a relational database can be used to select and structure content for specific language learning programs.
- Chapter 9 describes the possibilities for supplemental output based on content systemization.

Remarks on Substance and Style

Over the years I have frequently spoken on aspects of content systemization at conferences and have also published various contributions on the topic (see some in References). Parts of this book make use of some of those elements, mostly in updated form.

Many examples come from French as a foreign language. For those totally unfamiliar with French, I believe the accompanying explanations give sufficient background to understand the *raison d'être* of the material presented. As the profession would say: "The context should make it comprehensible for the intended purpose."

2   Of Concepts and Connotations

An introductory presentation of terms is found in many books dealing with language teaching and learning. For those familiar with that literature, the following discussion could be superfluous. However, even identical terms used in the profession can have various connotations. I do not claim to determine what the connotations should be, but I need to clarify how I understand and nuance some of them. Some commonly used terms in English, which need clarification even when used by native speakers, may have different meanings in other languages when translated literally or approximately because of the lack of an evident counterpart. Some English terms that are used to differentiate concepts in the domain of language learning may simply not be possible in other languages, or lack proper equivalents—words like *approach* and *method*; *efficacy* and *effectiveness*; *situation* and *setting*; *competence*, *skill*, and *proficiency*; and *procedure*, *strategy*, and *technique*. Even in English some of these words are prone to evolution and confusion (see the discussion on *competence* in Taylor 1988; Hymes 1992; Lee 2006). Some English terms that are representing core concepts, such as *Waystage* and *Vantage*, are untranslatable in many languages; in those cases, I either keep the term unchanged or replace it with an approximation.

It is even more problematic when Anglophone authors build an argument, if not a whole theory, on the difference between *usage* and *use*, between *progress* and *progression*, between *real* and *realistic*, or between *learn* and *acquire*, while some other languages cannot make such differences conceptually. Disparity in meaning can even apply to "transparent" words, formally identical in many languages, but still evoking different concepts, such as *method*, *curriculum*, or *syllabus*.

In the pages that follow, I make some effort to diminish the number of terms, not by erasing obvious connotations but by viewing one and the same term in different gradations—as far as is feasible. Moreover, I will not limit myself to identifying and discussing connotations but will also add some critical considerations in the perspective of our topic.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The first term looked at is *content* itself, also in relation to related terms such as *input*, *intake*, *subject matter*, and the notion of *didacteme*. Next the term *systemization* is explained. Content is circumscribed in various ways and at various levels, from general objectives to the most detailed formats in syllabuses and textbooks. It is therefore helpful to "define the definers" of content. Equally varied is the term *method*. Those variants need to be identified because methods are conveyors of content. Finally, a short section is devoted to the terms *second* and *foreign* language.

2.1   CONTENT: DEFINITION AND RELATED TERMS

2.1.1   Definition of Content

In this book, the term *content* refers to anything that can be defined as *learnable* in order for someone to become more proficient in the language and more familiar with any of its aspects.

I could have written *learnable and acquirable* to reflect the difference made in English and other languages between *learning* and *acquisition*, the former emphasizing a more cognitive or explicit approach, the latter a more natural or implicit one. But to keep the term to a single noun, *learning*, I prefer the terminological distinction between explicit and implicit learning. Related to that distinction are the terms *instructed* and *naturalistic* learning. There is, of course, a complex gray zone between the two, which has received scholarly attention (e.g., N. Ellis 1993, 1994, 2005; R. Ellis 2004, 2005a, 2006; Hulstijn 2005; Isemonger 2007; Robinson 1997). My definition of *content* does not mean that it must be explicitly learned. The less conscious, implicit learning of content also applies.

The Common European Framework (CEF) uses *content* as one of the three basic components to describe its approach, i.e., "by providing a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods" (Council of Europe 2001, p. 1). *Content* thus covers everything that can be taught and learned.

Content pertains obviously to lingual items such as sounds, words, collocations, expressions, and grammatical structures. It can include cultural knowledge (history, geography, institutions, social life, etc.) and literary knowledge (authors, trends, titles, etc.). This traditional content comes to the foreground whenever language is dealt with pedagogically. It is also—and this is sometimes snubbed in global or natural approaches—the realm that many if not most learners instinctively focus on initially: here are *discrete things to learn*. It is surprising that some methodologists want to prohibit this reaction as if the only way to approach language is holistic. Even if the goal is to have fluent and meaningful communication, most learners,

in particular in the context of a school classroom, want a grasp of discrete elements.

There are other aspects to content—less palpable but still capable of being identified as learnable elements. It is important to stress this aspect to counter the impression that content deals only with words and structures. To name some of the most relevant aspects:

- *Pragmatic and sociocultural*: pragmatic content includes rules of appropriateness, such as the use of *tu* and *vous* in French or the interpretation of nonverbal signs in the foreign language culture. These can be taught explicitly but often come implicitly. The sociocultural realm conveys historical or contemporary facts as well as cultural perceptions and values, such as acceptance of diversity and adaptation to other cultural norms. It can also pertain to elements that identify the dangers of stereotypes and folklorization.
- *Skill-defined*: the traditional four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are, as modes of interaction with the language, a dimension of content. Any concrete material presented to the learners must indeed be in a format that they can receive either by reading or listening. It is possible to determine which parts of content are limited to which skill.
- *Strategies-defined*: since the development of strategy-based learning in the 1960s, mainly building upon Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (1956), a number of specific abilities to deal with language have become part of the teaching process. These include strategies like guessing from context, skimming, scanning, determining the main idea, etc. Such strategies can expand to general tasks such as giving an efficient oral presentation or writing a well-structured text. The explicit inclusion of such tasks makes them part of content.
- *Attitude-inciting*: still building on Bloom's taxonomy, developing students' *attitudes* has become part of educational objectives. These can be course-bound, such as *willingness to read* or *desire to use correct grammar.* They can also be cross-curricular, like *having respect for another* or *willingness to help a weaker student.* Of course, there is no such thing as *attitudinal content* because attitudes are intangible mind-sets, forged by character and classroom interaction. However, content can be "attitude-inciting." Elements that are meant to stimulate certain attitudes can thus be identified and quantified as part of content, such as a *fascinating* story, an *inspiring* song, or an *engaging* language game.

According to the ages, levels, interests, and desired objectives of learners, it is possible to systemize a selection from an inventory with such elements and plan their inclusion in a language program.