



SYSTEMIZATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: MONITORING CONTENT PROGRESSION.

Author: Wilfried Decoo.

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The history of language teaching is often presented as the history of language teaching methods. Certainly in our own time, the dominant debate has been about the *how* of teaching. Much less conspicuous is discussion of the *what*: What exactly are we trying to teach in the language classroom? What do we want our learners to learn? *Systematization in foreign language teaching* does not try to define what this should be, but its first argument is that much more attention should be given to the what of language teaching, to the content we wish to impart. Its second and central argument is that for effective learning this content must be organised and systematized, and it makes a proposal for how this can be achieved.

Systemization in Foreign Language Teaching: Monitoring Content Progression opens with a preface explaining its origins in a project, beginning in the 1980s and still ongoing today, to produce a textbook for the teaching of French in Belgium. This project revealed the haphazard approach to content in existing textbooks and sparked the research and development that resulted in this volume. Chapter 1 then gives a brief illustration of how content systemization can work, before Chapter 2 defines the key concept of content: ‘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’ (p. 16). Content then, can mean sounds, words, collocations, expressions and grammatical structures, as well as pragmatic knowledge, skills, strategies and cultural knowledge. After this introductory material, Chapters 3 and 4 seek to put the arguments in perspective by tracing the history of content systemization from the middle ages, with a particular focus on the Council of Europe’s work since the 1970s. Chapter 5 argues that while the various types of content may all be present in a course, the primary component is vocabulary, since it is largely through words that other types of content are realised.

Chapters 6 to 9 are the heart of the book, giving the arguments for systemization and explaining how it can be achieved. Chapter 6 looks at the functions of systemization. Systemization is argued to assist learning by enabling the monitoring of the content so far presented at any point

in a course. This allows the controlled introduction of new content, review of previously-introduced material and reliable and valid testing. Systemization further enables curriculum continuity between and within levels of schooling. Chapters 7 to 9 then propose a particular approach to systemization. The central idea is for the creation of a database in which every item of content is entered. Each database entry includes details on the item of content, such as an L1 equivalent and a list of semantic fields the item is used in, and most crucially lists the location in the course where the item appears. This database can then be used by the course developer in a variety of ways. For example, when planning a unit on a particular topic, the database can show which items of content related to that topic have featured in the course so far, allowing for repetitions of those items to be provided and for the careful introduction of new items of content. In short, it is argued that the database allows the course developer to know precisely where learners really are in their language development, rather than working with estimates and assumptions.

There are several things to like about this book. First, compared to many books on language learning, its perspective is broader, consistently addressing more than ELT and citing the work of scholars all over Europe writing in and on a variety of languages. It is still somewhat Euro-centric, but certainly not Anglo-centric. Second, the volume's primary concern is language teaching in secondary education, and the typical realities of limited class hours and limited motivation. Given the number of learners and teachers involved, this is arguably an under-addressed area in our field. Finally, the arguments for systemization and for vocabulary as the central component of a systematic approach are strong. Vocabulary knowledge has been shown to correlate strongly with overall proficiency and with each of the four skills, and the benefits of a systematic approach to review and the provision of multiple occurrences of items are clear.

There are also, however, a number of problems. First, though the book is long and exhaustive in some aspects – we get, for example, considerable detail about how to input searches into *Microsoft Access* – there are some simple points that are not clarified. One example is what exactly is recorded in the database. At some points it seems the suggestion is that a record be kept of only those items of content intended for explicit teaching; at other points that every occurrence of an item of content be recorded.

Second, the feasibility of the proposals seems questionable. The book states that ‘the aim here is to suggest the use of manageable instruments for average textbook authors and teachers’ (p. 178), but, given the applications discussed, it seems to envisage a database containing thousands of entries, with each entry containing a considerable number of details. While the usefulness of such a database is clear, its creation would surely only be possible for very well-funded, long-term large-scale projects. A related problem is that there are many suggestions of ways the database *could* be used: more detail about the textbook projects from which the book originated and how their own database has *actually* been used would have made a clearer and more convincing case for the proposals’ feasibility. Furthermore, considering that vocabulary is argued to be the primary component of content, I would question whether creating such an extensive database is necessary. Many of the uses envisaged for the database and many of the goals of systemization can be achieved using standard concordancing software. Certainly, concordancing software has clear limitations and a database would provide a more accurate picture of all the content items, but it is not clear that the advantages are worth the much greater costs involved.

Finally, the book seems to struggle with the relationship between teaching and learning. In words of clarification that close the introductory chapter and also the key chapter on the purposes of systemization (Chapter 6), the book acknowledges that learning does not automatically follow teaching and that learners vary in their development. Yet in the main body of the chapters, the assumption is made repeatedly that content taught is known, in comments such as ‘at any moment, the database can pinpoint how many words and expressions a student has learned to function in each semantic field’ (p. 286). The cautious words of clarification should modify the claims throughout the book.

Systematization in foreign language teaching is a thought-provoking book. It is surely correct in arguing that the what of language teaching has been neglected in favour of the how, and that the systematic presentation of content can support learning. It makes concrete proposals for how content systemization can be achieved, and despite this writer’s doubts about their feasibility, it is to be welcomed as a stimulus to further work towards this goal.



Biodata

Dale Brown has worked in ELT for ten years both as a teacher and as a full-time materials writer and editor. He is now a member of the Nanzan English Education Center at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan, where he teaches a variety of courses for non-English majors. His main interests lie in extensive reading, vocabulary teaching, and materials development.