

Foundations for Selecting Educational Linguistic Content and Criteria for Its Organization

أسس اختيار المحتوى اللغوي التربوي ومعايير تنظيمه

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Abstract:

This research paper addresses the topic of educational linguistic content as a set of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes designed and presented by the teacher or educational institution in order to develop the learner's understanding and enhance their cognitive level. It constitutes a fundamental pillar of the teaching-learning process, as it includes texts, video clips, presentations, or interactive activities aimed at enabling the learner to acquire new abilities effectively.

The objective of this study is to identify the most prominent linguistic and non-linguistic criteria adopted by curriculum and program designers when selecting educational content, as well as to determine the most important linguistic gradations according to which this content is organized for a targeted group of learners.

Keywords: educational linguistic content, content selection, linguistic gradation, communicative pattern.

ملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية موضوع المحتوى اللغوي التربوي باعتباره مجموعة من المعارف والمهارات والقيم والمواقف التي يصممها ويقدمها المعلم أو المؤسسة التعليمية بهدف تنمية فهم المتعلم وتعزيز مستواه المعرفي. ويشكل هذا المحتوى ركيزة أساسية في عملية التعليم والتعلم، حيث يشمل نصوصًا ومقاطع فيديو وعروضًا تقديمية أو أنشطة تفاعلية تهدف إلى تمكين المتعلم من اكتساب قدرات جديدة بفعالية.

ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تحديد أبرز المعايير اللغوية وغير اللغوية التي يعتمد عليها مصممو المناهج والبرامج عند اختيار المحتوى التعليمي، وكذلك تحديد أهم المستويات اللغوية التي يتم تنظيم هذا المحتوى وفقًا لها لمجموعة مستهدفة من المتعلمين.

كلمات مفتاحية: المحتوى اللغوي التعليمي، اختيار المحتوى، المستوى اللغوي، النمط التواصل.

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1. Introduction

Educational linguistic content refers to the totality of knowledge, vocabulary, rules, and language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—that are planned to be

acquired by the learner. This content represents the “core” of language curricula, as it is carefully designed to lead the learner gradually toward communicative competence; that is, the ability to use language practically in everyday life situations, such as persuasion, description, and narration, while taking into account individual differences as well as developmental and psychological needs.

The content is usually composed of integrated dimensions that form the basic structure of language teaching. These include the phonological level, in terms of the rules governing the pronunciation of letters, their points of articulation, and their functions such as stress and intonation; the morphological level, which is concerned with word structure and derivation; and the syntactic level, which deals with the rules governing sentence construction and grammatical inflection. This is followed by the lexical level, which focuses on the learner’s linguistic repertoire, including vocabulary, synonyms, and meanings.

To ensure the effectiveness of the content in achieving its educational objectives, it is subject to careful selection according to pedagogical and scientific criteria, the most important of which is accuracy; that is, the linguistic material must be free from errors. Another criterion is logical progression, meaning that the learner should move from the simple to the complex and from the concrete to the abstract, while taking into consideration the developmental characteristics of learners, particularly the suitability of concepts and topics to their age level and comprehension abilities.

How, then, should educational linguistic content be selected for the learner? And what linguistic gradations should be taken into account when organizing this educational content?

2. Foundations for Selecting Educational Content

There is no doubt that one of the most prominent elements upon which the teaching of Arabic relies is the element of selection, given that it is a fundamental principle. This selection is not carried out randomly, subjectively, or by chance; rather, those responsible for designing it rely on scientific criteria that make it controllable and subject to examination. The selection of a course syllabus is determined by several factors, including external and internal factors. The external factors, namely the non-linguistic ones, are represented in the following:

1.1. Objectives:

Objectives are among the most prominent factors influencing the element of selection. In teaching the first language, objectives differ from those in teaching a foreign language. (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 65) As a scientific term, objectives also differ from the broader goals established when planning a given language education process. Objectives are directly connected to the educational act and must be clearly defined when selecting the linguistic pattern. Each of them has a direct influence on the selection of content. Objectives include the following:

a. Goals: These refer to the set of educational objectives or purposes that must be achieved through a specific educational system. Their scope and feasibility help curriculum designers

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choose among different content alternatives and provide guidance to the teacher in planning, implementing, and evaluating outcomes.

Examples of goals include: (Al-Samouk & Al-Shammari, 2005, p. 69)

- Preparing the good citizen.
- Developing learners' attitudes, values, and habits, and enabling adaptation to society.
- Developing the skills of scientific thinking and critical thinking.

b. Expectations: These are the set of objectives or expected outcomes that are intended to be achieved through the teaching process of specific subjects, programs, or instructional units. They are graded levels, including the cognitive level, which concerns information; the affective level, which concerns moral and ethical aspects; and the skills-based level, which concerns the application of knowledge.

Educational objectives are characterized by the following: (Atta, 2005, p. 374)

- _ They are formulated by educators, including specialists, teachers, and educational supervisors.
- _ They represent a medium-term strategy for achieving the goals of society.
- _ They encourage learners to adopt a scientific approach and systematic thinking in solving historical, geographical, social, and economic problems.
- _ They acquaint learners with their rights and duties.
- _ They enable learners to assimilate the foundations, principles, and concepts of entrepreneurial concepts.

c. Outcomes and Instructional Objectives:

Instructional objectives have great value in the educational process, as they constitute the main guide for the activities of both the teacher and the learner. They help the teacher determine what learners are required to learn, thereby enabling the selection of the cognitive level, methods, approaches, and means appropriate to the teaching and learning of a specific subject directed to a particular class level. They also assist the teacher in selecting methods of assessment and evaluation, through which the teacher can clearly understand learners' performance and the extent to which they have achieved what they are required to learn (Atta, 2005, p. 375). Examples of instructional objectives include: that the learner should master the use of verbal and nominal sentences in oral and written expression.

2.1. Course Level: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 66)

The level of the course is of particular importance in language teaching, since linguistic content is selected according to a specific level. There is no doubt that the selection of content intended for children at the primary stage differs qualitatively from content designed for the middle or secondary stage. Its objective in primary school also differs from one objective to another, and this is determined according to many criteria, including cognitive decisions, the linguistic environment, and the accompanying materials included in the course syllabus.

2.3. Time: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 68)

It is commonly recognized that any course syllabus should be implemented according to a specific timetable. Moreover, the teaching of the first language differs from the teaching of a foreign language.

What should be pointed out here is that the factors mentioned above are not directly related to the language itself, nor do they specifically concern the learners. They are external factors; nevertheless, they are all important in the process of selection.

As for the factors that are closely related to the essence of language, or what may be termed internal factors, that is, linguistic factors, they are those that can be observed in the substance of selecting linguistic materials. This leads us directly to discuss two aspects of selecting the content of the course syllabus, namely: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 68)

a. Selection of the Linguistic Pattern: Linguistic patterns play a major role in selecting linguistic content. They are divided into two types: a formal pattern and an informal pattern. The selection of course content must take this diversity into account, especially the use of the formal language in the early stages. If we turn to the form of linguistic performance, whether written or spoken, we will notice that selection in most curricula in Arab countries focuses on written language. In reality, this is “a selection based on immaturity and a lack of awareness of the true nature of language, because neglecting the spoken level in selection will inevitably lead to a major deficiency in language teaching, particularly in receptive performance.” (HUDSON, n.d, p. 74)

b. Selection of the Vocabulary of Linguistic Materials: Vocabulary lists represent an important source for selecting appropriate words for learners to study (Madkour, 2009, p. 304). The selection of content begins with the selection of the pattern, after which comes another step: the selection of the vocabulary of linguistic materials. The scope of selection is not the same across the levels of the pattern; therefore, it is necessary to rely on a precise criterion, namely the size of the categories within the level and the degree of frequency of its elements. The greater the number of categories and the more varied their frequency, the wider the scope of selection becomes. It is therefore natural that selection should be very limited at the phonological level, where the degree of frequency is very high. Consequently, there is hardly any room for selection, and it is not possible to teach some sounds of the language while excluding others. The same applies to the morphological level, where the scope of selection is narrow because of the limited number of morphological categories on the one hand, and the high degree of frequency of most of them on the other. For example, there is no reason to include in the content the morphological form *if'aw'ala*, as in *ikhshāwshana*, because its degree of frequency is very low. (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 43)

The real selection at the level of the vocabulary of linguistic materials, however, occurs at the lexical and syntactic levels.

First. The Lexicon / Lexical Level:

This refers to the selection of words within a specific linguistic content. The lexicon of any language contains a vast number of words; therefore, selection is an inevitable matter.

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However, it is useful in education only when it is based on objective criteria, which may be summarized as follows:

✓ Frequency: Fréquence (Tahan, n.d, p. 75)

Frequency refers to the extensive use of a word and the extent of its recurrence among members of society. The purpose of selecting linguistic material according to this criterion is to enable the learner to acquire specific skills. (Tahan, n.d, p. 75) Dr. Abd al-Rahman Haj Salah pointed out the necessity of using and employing the most frequently used words and structures, without neglecting the eloquent classical heritage words that were commonly used by the early Arabs. This is an important criterion when developing any linguistic content in school textbooks, as it protects the learner from unnecessary linguistic redundancy. Accordingly, those responsible for designing linguistic content should select an appropriate repertoire of words that helps the learner understand their ideas and principles. (Haj Salah, 1974, p. 30)

✓ Distribution: Répartition (Haj Salah, 1974, p. 30)

This criterion is considered a complement to the criterion of frequency*. It refers to the extent to which a word is used across different fields. There are words that are widely distributed in more than one domain, and these words are more useful in language teaching because the learner is thereby able to use a single word in several topics. Thus, the higher the distribution rate of a word, the greater its chance of being selected. The criterion of distribution enables the learner to acquire the ability to think in an organized and sound manner, and it raises their awareness of intellectual, scientific, and cognitive aspects through linguistic content. In applying the criterion of distribution, attention should be given to selecting appropriate words and distributing them across the texts of school textbooks.

✓ Criterion of Recallability or Memorability

There are words in a language that one can remember easily and without effort, and that can be readily recalled when a particular topic comes to mind. In fact, many experiments conducted on learners have shown that recallability is necessary for achieving the correct use of vocabulary. “A speaker may, during speech, say: I want to say, I want to say... yet be unable to grasp the word they actually want, and may ask their listeners to help them remember it. Likewise, the category that is easy to recall is the most useful and appropriate in selecting the lexical repertoire during language learning at a given stage, according to well-defined objectives.” (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 69)

- Criterion of the Consistency of Linguistic Content with the Learner’s Social Reality:

The formation of the learner within society begins from the social environment, with its customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and authenticity. For this reason, it is necessary to address our issues and the ideas employed in the linguistic content of the textbook on the basis of our own reality, not the present reality of others. The intellectual environment is therefore considered the basic reference for linguistic and social values, as it exerts its influence on both the private and public spheres alike. Accordingly, “the culture of societies

is closely connected to the educational process. Moreover, the process of education and teaching constitutes one of the social systems of the society, from whose culture education proceeds in order to define educational objectives and the foundations of the teaching and learning process, both at the theoretical and practical levels.” (Berkani, 2009, p. 43)

✓ The Psychological and Educational Criterion:

Frequency criteria alone are not sufficient for selecting words. Rather, it is also necessary to rely on psychological and educational criteria, such as the learnability of the word, meaning that it should not be difficult for the learner to acquire it, and its teachability, meaning that it should not be difficult for the teacher to teach it. This is due—alongside the previous criteria—to whether the word is long or short, regular or irregular (Haj Salah, 1974, pp. 31-32) ...

Second. The Syntactic Level:

Not all syntactic structures are equal in terms of frequency, distribution, learnability, or teachability. There are simple structures and complex ones, as well as central structures that are indispensable in language use and marginal structures that may be omitted. For this reason, selection has been based on statistical studies similar to those conducted on words, leading to the preparation of lists of basic syntactic structures that serve as a source for selecting grammatical content in the educational syllabus.

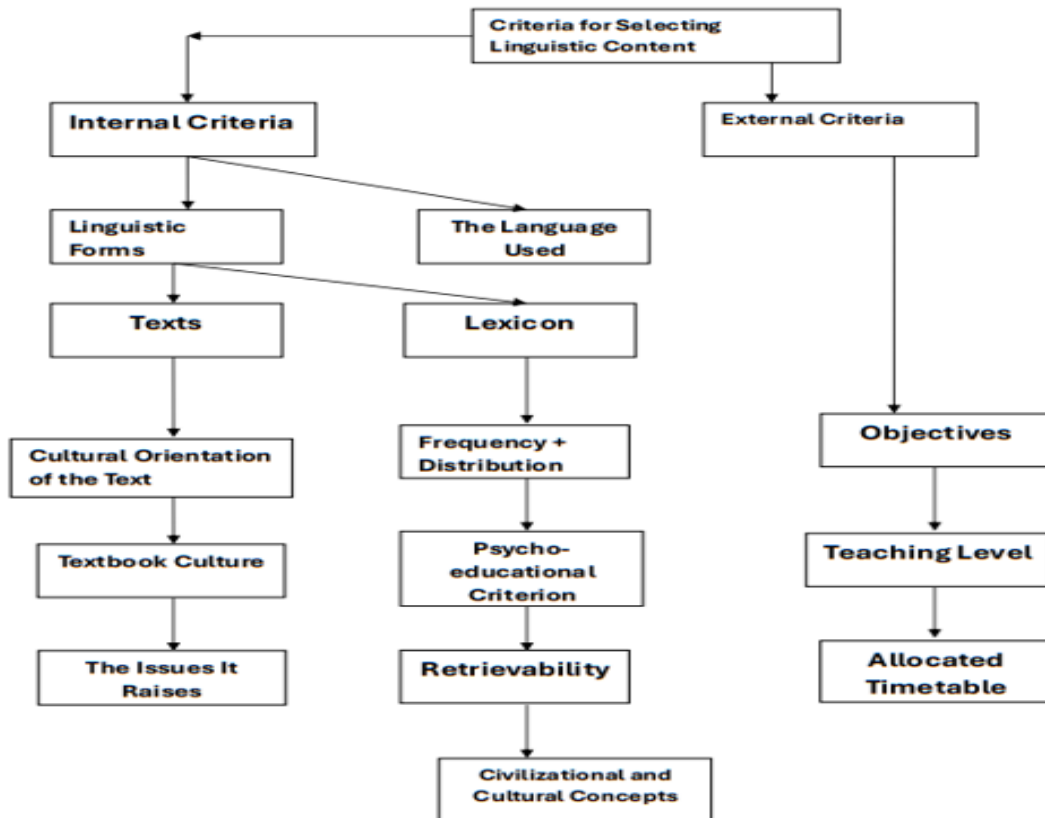
Perhaps the prevailing trend in selecting these lists is the adoption of the functional approach by linking syntactic structures to communicative events. (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 70)

2.4. Texts:

There is no disagreement that the selection of texts, after focusing on the lexical and syntactic levels, represents the main core of selecting linguistic content, especially since we have indicated that linking syntactic structures to communicative events is useful and necessary in selecting linguistic content. The selection of texts differs between teaching a language to our children and teaching them a foreign language. In the first syllabus, it is necessary to resort to authentic texts, while taking into consideration the simplification of the text at certain educational stages. These texts should be comprehensive in representing the culture of the nation and the various domains of life within it, and they should correspond to the intellectual abilities of each level of learning.” (Al-Subaihi, 2004, p. 202)

This concerns the elements or foundations of selecting linguistic content. However, we cannot propose any linguistic content without referring to the remaining components of the curriculum. Such content cannot be properly established except through the presence of the other pillars of the educational process, the objectives intended to be achieved and embodied, and the roles of the educational process. For this reason, we have proposed a diagram that includes all the elements of the educational and pedagogical process, specifically the foundations for selecting linguistic content and the criteria for organizing it. The diagram is as follows: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 61)

Diagram Illustrating the Foundations for Selecting Educational Content



3. Criteria for Organizing Educational Content:

The purpose of organizing content is to make learning easier, more accessible, and more gradual. The aim of the organization process is reflected in the following:

- _ Speed, ease, and gradual progression in learning.
- _ Growth in learning, since arranging the learner's experiences helps promote learning development. (Al-Samouk & Al-Shammari, 2005, p. 76)
- _ Continuity, meaning the vertical repetition of concepts and skills in order to consolidate them in the learner's mind.
- _ Sequence, through arranging ideas and information progressively from easy to difficult, and from simple to complex.
- _ Integration, by linking knowledge and information horizontally with one another, whether within a single school subject or across different subjects.

3.1. Linear Gradation: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 77)

This is the pattern that prevailed in language teaching in most countries of the world until recently. Its method is based on presenting each item of content all at once, offering it in a detailed manner that leaves no aspect of it untreated. The aim of this approach is to ensure that the learner masters each item before moving on to another. If, for example, we present a lesson on pronouns according to this pattern, we present everything related to

pronouns: whether they are separate or attached pronouns, and whether they occur in the nominative or accusative position.

There is no doubt that this type of gradation leads to a major deficiency in language teaching, and strong objections have been raised against its application for clear reasons, the most important of which are the following:

Presenting an item all at once leads to its intensive study, after which it falls into forgetfulness and neglect. It is true that most syllabi include review units, but these units are unable to address this confusion. The overlap and succession of units one after another may lead to a very slow process of language teaching because of the detailed presentation of each item separately. This has serious negative effects on the learner, who finds themselves particularly unable to use what they have learned. As a result, the learner naturally experiences a state of frustration, which strongly and negatively affects their motivation toward learning. Therefore, experience has shown that linear gradation does not distinguish between the use of linguistic material in productive performance and receptive performance. This also poses a clear risk to the learner, who seeks to acquire the ability to perform through writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

3.2. Cyclical Gradation: (Haid, 2012, p. 146)

This type of gradation stands in contrast to linear gradation. It is based on the factor of relationships, and on the idea that one cannot truly know something unless one knows the relationships that connect it to other things. In this approach, one aspect of an item is presented alongside other aspects of other items; then the same item is revisited by presenting a second aspect, then a third, and so on. In this way, the learner becomes familiar with the item and progresses from its basic elements to its secondary ones, while its relationships with other items become clear. Pronouns, for example, may first be introduced through separate singular pronouns, then separate plural pronouns, followed by a lesson on pronouns in the accusative case, then the same pronouns in another case, and so forth. They are thus distributed across the sections of the syllabus, and they may not be completed within a single level.

We conclude that cyclical gradation is more appropriate for language teaching than linear gradation in linguistic use. It also makes language teaching faster when the learner finds themselves able to use what they are learning, which strengthens motivation for learning the language.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that linear gradation is rejected, whereas cyclical gradation is accepted and regarded as significant in the organization of content. However, the discussion concerning gradation has, in fact, shifted toward comparing three gradational patterns, namely:

- Linguistic gradation.
- Situational gradation.
- Functional gradation.

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a. Linguistic Gradation: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 79)

This pattern constituted the basis of most curricula until recently, as the prevailing belief was that mastery of grammatical rules was the essential element in mastering a language. Accordingly, curricula were organized on the basis of morphological and syntactic categories, to the extent that curriculum units were often named after a specific grammatical issue, such as one unit on the active participle and another on the passive participle. It is clear that this pattern carries obvious shortcomings, the most important of which is that it focuses on the rules of language rather than the rules of use.

Moreover, language teaching primarily aims at mastering communication. Focusing on grammatical rules leads to a curriculum that is deficient in terms of the lexicon, which makes the learner unable to use what they have learned. This does not mean that grammatical training should be entirely excluded from the organization of content; rather, it is necessary to emphasize that selection and organization in this regard must be based on the extent to which such arrangement effectively supports language use.

b. Situational Gradation: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 78)

This pattern spread after the shortcomings of grammatical gradation became evident. In this type of gradation, grammatical and morphological categories are not the basis of progression; rather, situations are. The term refers to the natural environment in which linguistic communication takes place.

From this perspective, it was observed that curriculum units were named after situations, such as “in the restaurant” or “at the airport,” along with the speech situations required by a restaurant, for example. However, this pattern was not immune to criticism either, as it became clear that these situations were merely a framework for grammatical gradation, which remained dominant because of the mechanical drills included in each unit.

c. Functional Gradation: (Al-Rajhi, 2004, p. 80)

This pattern makes communicative events the basis of content gradation. It therefore includes examples of real language use, while at the same time not disregarding grammatical and situational foundations. This pattern must be built on simplicity, then gradually move toward intermediate and more complex forms in subsequent stages within a network of functional relationships. This requires that grammatical rules appear within linguistic functions, which helps place language within a natural, non-artificial framework.

4. Conclusion:

The criteria for selecting and organizing content ensure the presentation of scientific material that is accurate, purposeful, and relevant to learners' needs. They contribute to achieving educational objectives efficiently, simplifying information, and taking individual differences into account, thereby enhancing the quality of the overall learning experience and supporting the development of the learner's personality. This is especially the case when the content is linked to objectives that clearly serve it, and when it is characterized by validity, scientific accuracy, and the assurance that information is free from errors. It should also keep pace with the latest discoveries and developments through the comprehensiveness of topics and depth in the essence of knowledge, while also ensuring that the content is appropriate to societal culture and to learners' interests and abilities.

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