BLOCK 4.
The past meets the present: Language teaching methods in the 20th and 21st centuries

Sub-block 4.3.
Communicative approaches

### Unit 4.3.1. The Threshold Level and Notional-Functional Syllabuses (N-F syllabuses)

Outline

1. Objectives of this unit
2. Historical background and rationale behind the N-F Syllabuses

    2.1. Socio-political factors

    2.2. General educational factors

    2.3. Language teaching factors
3. The Council of Europe
4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"
5. Analysis of the components of the N-F Syllabuses
6. Critical assessment of the N-F Syllabuses

1. Objectives of this unit

1. Report on the origins of the Threshold Level
2. Understand the rationale behind the Notional-Functional Syllabuses.
3. Describe the nature of the Notional-Functional Syllabuses.
4. Relate the new programme with an emerging change in the prevailing methodological approach.
5. Analyse the changes brought about by new syllabuses, from a linguistic and pedagogical perspective.
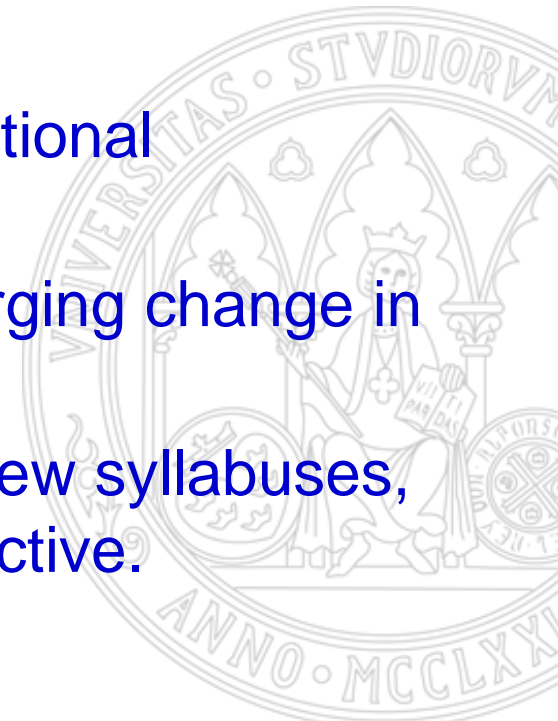
2. Historical background and rationale behind behind the N-F Syllabuses

The "Threshold Level" or the "Modern Languages Project", sponsored by the Council of Europe in the late 1970s, is rooted in three different factors of a different nature:

- Socio-political factors

- General educational factors

- Language teaching factors

2. Historical background and rationale behind the N-F Syllabuses
## 2.1. Socio-political factors

1. **Peace in the World:**

    1.1. The need for peace in Europe after WWII: Foundation of the Council of Europe in 1949

    1.2. Communication among people facilitates mutual understanding

    1.3. Learning the language of other people helps to eliminate communicative barriers

2. **Democracy and education:**

    Education for all citizens: standards needed for establishing reliable levels in the educational system

3. **Travelling: trains, roads, airplanes**

    3.1. Travelling facilitates movement of people

    3.2. Travelling requires the knowledge of other languages for moving easily and communicating with people
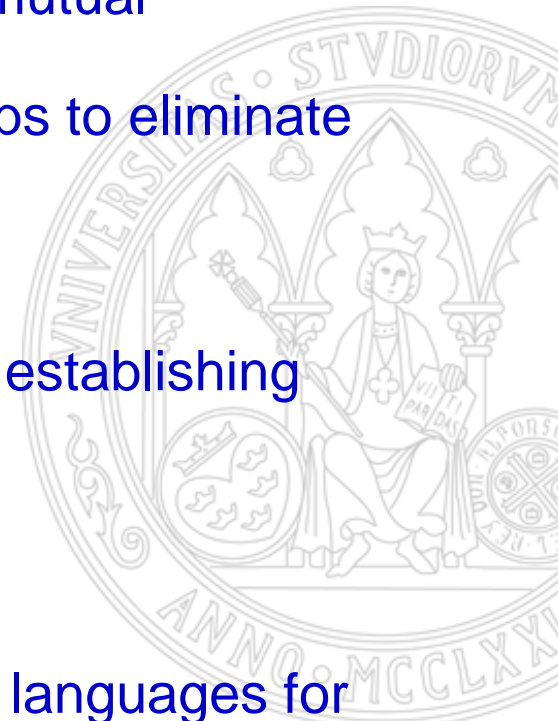
2. Historical background and rationale behind the N-F Syllabuses
2.2. General.educational factors

✓ Constructivism and progressive perspectives to curriculum design.

✓ Taba (1962, 1971). Model for curriculum development in school contexts. Developed from Tyler's (1949) model. Major influence in the 1960s and 1970s:

Step One: Diagnosing **Needs**,
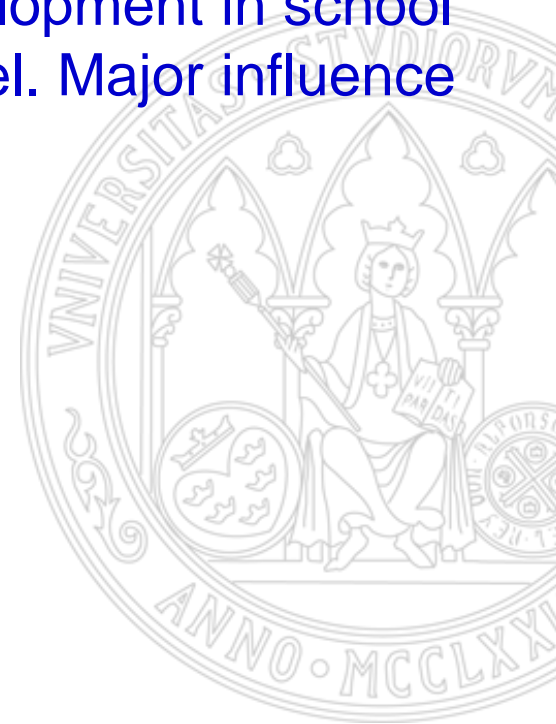
Step Two: Formulating Specific Objectives,

Step Three: Selecting Content,

Step Four: Organising Content,

Step Five: Selecting Learning Experiences,

Step Six: Organising Learning Experiences,
Step Seven: Evaluating

2. Historical background and rationale behind the N-F Syllabuses
2.3. Language teaching factors

❑ By the end of the 1960s applied linguists and educators were persuaded about the need to go beyond structurally based courses.

❑ The concept of "situation" and the acquisition of structures through habit-formation theory were not enough to devise adequate and efficient language courses.

❑ New concept of language: A language is a means to comprehend and understand meanings or *notions* (e.g. time, quantity, duration, location). These notions are universal to all languages.

Which major principle by which previous method is contradicted in this new conception of language?

❑ **Notions** would become the unit of syllabus design in the 1970s.

Section 4 (Wilkins' 1976 Notional Syllabuses)

3. The Council of Europe

1.1. **A European organization**, only for democratic countries.

Founded in 1949. Nowadays, 47 member states with some 800 million citizens. Totally independent from the European Union (EU).

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation whose main aims are:

- *to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law;*
- *to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity;*
- *to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society;*
- *to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform*

http://www.coe.int/aboutcoe/index.asp?page=nosObjectifs

3. The Council of Europe

1.2. **Key moments in its history**

❑ 1957 First intergovernmental conference on European co-operation in language teaching

❑ 1971 Beginning of the Modern Languages Project, or the "Threshold Level"

❑ 1975 Publication of first 'Threshold Level' specification

❑ 1994 European Centre for Modern Languages established

❑ 2001 European Year of Languages

*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*

European Language Portfolio

Block 5

Don't FORGET!

4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"

✓ The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level".

✓ Director: John Trim.

✓ Threshold level: "A metaphor which is designed to capture the notion of "crossing over" from the dependency of a learner to the self-sufficiency of a trained language user" (Howatt, 2004: 338).
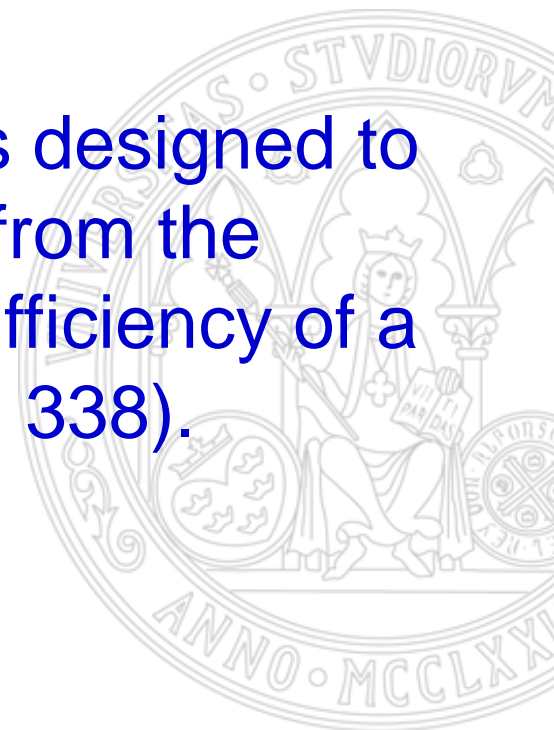
4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"

✓ Aims of the project (Howatt, 2004: 339):

1. To produce a detailed account of the *basic* language needs of adult learners and the linguistic material which was needed in order to satisfy those needs.

To be able to make contact with each other as people, to exchange information and opinions, talk about experiences, likes and dislikes, to explore our similarities and differences, the unity in diversity of our complicated and crowded continent".

(Trim, 1980: x. In Howatt, 2004: 339, 351)

2. To set up a system of internationally recognised qualifications in foreign language skills that would promote Europe-wide employment and mobility.

Students would study modules (units) with different learning objectives expressed in functions. Units would be collected as 'credits' for the issuing of certificates of attainment.

4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"

✓ Key dates and works:

❑ 1971: project begins in a symposium in Switzerland.

❑ 1972: Richterich. *A model for the definition of language needs of adults learning a modern language.*

    ❑ Language needs

    ❑ Learning needs

    ❑ Taxonomy of situations

    ❑ Learner roles

    ❑ Types of communicative activity

    ❑ Germ of Munby's 1978 work: *Communicative Syllabus Design.*

❑ 1972: Wilkins. *The Linguistic and Situational Content of the Common Core in a Unit/Credit System*

❑ 1973: van Ek. *The 'Threshold Level' in a Unit/Credit System.*

❑ **1975: van Ek. *The Threshold Level in a European Unit/Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults.* [for English]**

Adaptations to French (1976), Spanish (1979), German (1980), Italian (1981).

Other versions of the Threshold level and other levels: *Threshold 1990* (1990), *Waystage* (1998), *Vantage* (2000)

Block 5

4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"

❑ **1976. Wilkins. *Notional Syllabuses.***

- **Major impact in this project and in the development of CLT.**

- **Main contributions:**

  1) Distinction between

     – *synthetic* syllabus (leading to the goal of linguistic perfection rather than communicative competence. Focus on accuracy) and

     – *analytic* syllabus (leading to the goal of communicative competence. Focus on fluency)

  2) Notions: semantico-grammatical categories and communicative functions

  A notional syllabus contains:

  a) the meanings and concepts the learner needs in order to communicate (e.g. time, quantity, duration, location) and the language needed to express them. These concepts and meanings are called notions

  b) the language needed to express different functions or speech acts (e.g. requesting, suggesting, promising, describing).

  (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 402)

4. The Modern Languages Project or the "Threshold Level"

✓ The Threshold Level is responsible for the following key aspects in the shaping of N-F syllabuses:

- Selection of notions (concepts; e.g. time quantity…)
- Identification and selection of functions (purpose of language use: offers, complaints, presentation, etc.)
- Decision on linguistic structures implied by functions.
- Identification of grammar patterns implied by those linguistic structures
- Selection vocabulary required to fulfil the functions specified.

✓ The Threshold Level had a major impact in the design of communicative programs and textbooks in Europe, all based on N-F syllabuses.

✓ But N-F syllabuses are *not* a teaching procedure.

5. Analysis of the components of the N-F Syllabuses

Axis 1. The Why. Underlying principles and beliefs

- ❑ Theory of language (nature of language, including approach to culture)
  - ▪ Language is a system for communication
  - ▪ Language is defined by linguistic functions (what to say when for which purpose).
  - ▪ Language is always used within a context.
  - ▪ Linguistic forms are subordinated to meaning.

- ❑ Theory of learning (learning principles)
  - ▪ Tends to be based on usage (inductive): You acquire language by practising with it.
  - ▪ However, the theory of learning is not a major issue yet in N-F Syllabuses.

- ❑ Theory of teaching (pedagogical principles)
  - • Practice with functional linguistic items.
  - • Mechanical repetition of functional patterns, but more occasional than structurally based methods.
  - • The syllabus is decided by educational authorities after a thorough 'needs analysis' stage.
  - • No use of L1.
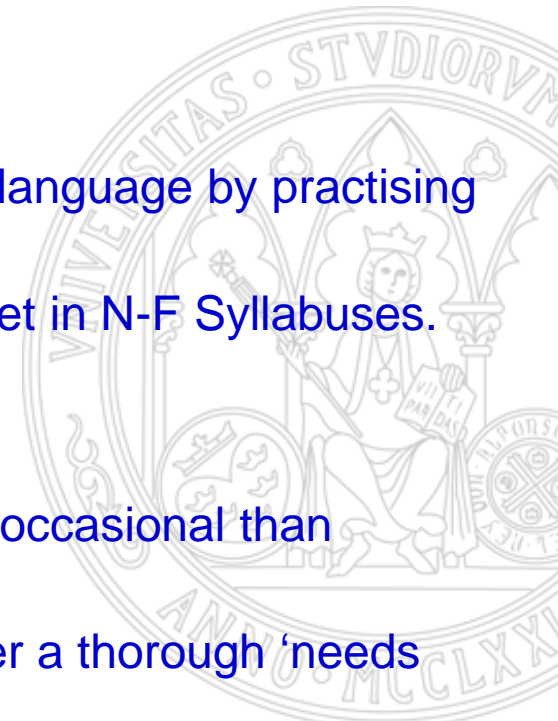
5. Analysis of the components of the N-F Syllabuses

Axis 2. The What. Objectives of teaching. Syllabus specifications

- Notions (concepts; e.g. time quantity…)
- Functions (purpose of language use: offers, complaints, presentation, etc.)
- Linguistic structures implied by functions
- Grammar patterns implied by those linguistic structures
- Vocabulary required to fulfil the functions specified.
- Emphasised skills: Speaking (communicative interaction), reading

5. Analysis of the components of the N-F Syllabuses

Axis 3. The How. Activities through which the selected content is transmitted to the students and other procedural aspects

❑ Activities:

  ▪ The N-F Syllabus has not yet defined teaching activities in order to reach its goals.

  ▪ Activities developed are taken from the ALM. Poor in variety.

  ▪ Repetitive activities are based on functional sentences.

  ▪ Initial dialogues are more situationally conditioned and include more explicitly linguistic functions contextualized around a topic.

❑ Role of teacher: The teacher is the main authority in the classroom. Error correction is somehow relaxed, favouring transmission of content.

❑ Role of students: mainly passive, following given models.

❑ Role of instructional materials: basic guide, professional elaboration.

1, 2

6. Critical assessment of the N-F Syllabuses

After performing practice activity 1,

a) *Can you think of any advantages in the N-F Syllabus, if compared against the ALM?*

b) *Do you think that the N-F Syllabus increases students' motivation if compared with the structurally based methods?*

c) *Can a new method be successful using the teaching activities of a previous method? Why/Why not?*
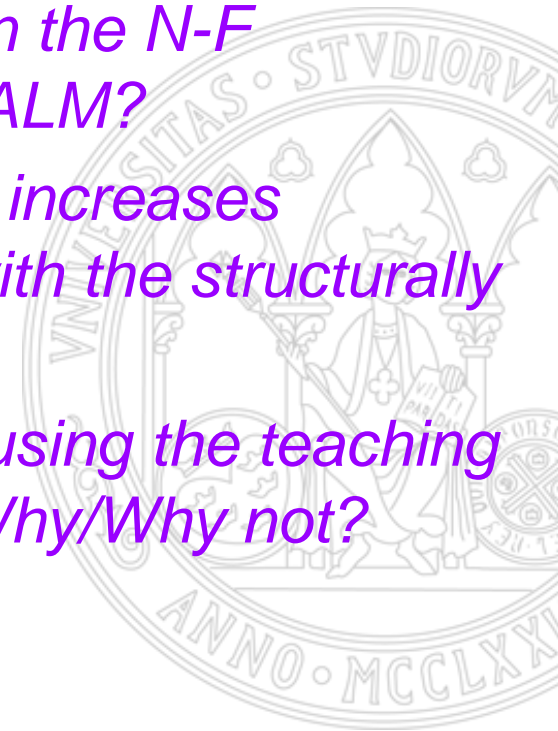
6. Critical assessment of the N-F Syllabuses

❑ **Positive aspects:**

1. Overall emphasis on communication and using language for a purpose (functional view of language)

2. Tendency to select more authentic communicative situations, more relevant for the communicative needs of the students.

3. Functional language selected: closer to real language use.

4. Lower emphasis on form and higher emphasis on the meaning to be transmitted.

5. The use of L2 in the classroom gains momentum.

6. More abundant dialogues and interactive activities, functionally conditioned.

7. Students become more significant participants in the classroom through the increase of interaction in the classroom.

8. Allowed for a functional approach to language testing and assessment (Howatt, 2004: 339)

9. For teachers: sense of freedom from rigid structural syllabuses (Howatt, 2004: 339)

6. Critical assessment of the N-F Syllabuses

❑ **Negative aspects:**

1. Wilkins' original model notional syllabus model was criticised on the same grounds as the structuctural syllabus advocated by the ALM.

   It replaced one list of structures with one list of notions and functions.

   It did not emphasise communicative processes but *products* (communicative in this case).

2. The linguistic inventory of the syllabus requires adaptation to the students' linguistic needs and its implementation in the classroom.

3. The analysis of students' needs requires adaptation to the cultural characteristics of different kinds of students with different culture.

4. The N-F Syllabus does not define the activities leading to the achievement of the goals previously defined.

5. As a whole: it is a method loosely defined and therefore necessarily transitory.

   Do you agree? Why / why not?

6. Critical assessment of the N-F Syllabuses

❑ **Influence of the N-F Syllabuses on FLT:**
   Key factor in the development of CLT!

   Unit 4.3.2.