



# Procrustes in the Classroom: Imposing Standards as a Future Trend in Language Teaching

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## Abstract

*Procrustes' bed is a philosophical concept that describes an arbitrary imposition of a given standard to the members of a community, or users of a system without consideration of their actual needs. The present reflection further expands such notion of Procrustes' bed as the zeitgeist of present and future educational trends in foreign language teaching by assessing its scope of influence from a sheer critical-structuralist approach. We identify a contradiction amongst intention, design, and application granted the need of forcing language learners to comply with the rules and impositions of the curriculum in order for it to be successful. This standpoint does not address individual needs such as the idiolect or differences in cognitive profiles; thus little if any attention has been paid to learners in view of their continuous mechanising to serve the method or syllabus, and not, as it should, the method to serve them. We expose some inner reasons that stymie a clear communication between learners' needs and foreign language curriculum proposals, such as commercialism vs. ethical conflicts of interest, the urge of programmes to present results with evidence of learning, and the linear presentation content that bears no relationship to the nonlinear expressive possibilities found in native spontaneous speech. This presentation highlights the cognitive bias that stems from the Procrustean philosophy ruling the educational apparatus when students are subdued to the imposed course of action established a priori by the teacher, the syllabus, the curriculum, the national plan, the Department of Education, or overseas imported criteria.*

## 1. Introduction

According to Greek mythology, Procrustes was an Attic blacksmith and innkeeper killed by Theseus on his journey from Trecen. Procrustes used to attack violently all travellers going to Athens firstly by offering them food and a place to sleep. As soon as the guests fell asleep, Procrustes began the torture while they laid on a special bed: If their height was not enough for the bed, Procrustes sawed all four limbs in such a way that they could fit. If, however, they were smaller than the bed, Procrustes opted for tying arms and feet to stretch muscles and bones until they broke, thereby adjusting their bodies to the capricious size of the bed [9].

Using this metaphor as a basis, it is now usually known the name Procrustes as a concept linked to the ruling principle that forces individuals constituting a system to adapt to the norms, rules, and preferences of the system and not, on the contrary, that the system adapts to their needs. Thus we can draw a line of continuity with two opposite sides, placing the 'Procrustean' at one end and the "Ergonomic" —all that fits the shape and needs of the user—, in the antithetical end.

The Procrustean policy applies when citizens are forced to adapt to the needs of a system rather than reconfigure the system to suit the individual needs of each user. An example would be the urban mobility system such as subways, where it is impossible to schedule arrival and departure times according to individual requests, or assure a chair, arrival and departure points close from passenger's departure or destination preferences. The above specifications are only satisfied by an ergonomic system (taxi or car). Something similar could be argued in the store-departments clothing business versus tailoring the business. The former tries to fit people according to general size patterns. Buyers must adapt to these measures and those who are out of the standard (people of short stature, obesity or gigantism) should inevitably find another store, with a consequent over cost. Tailored clothes, conversely, are adapted to the needs of each buyer. From this philosophical perspective curricular impositions in language learning are an arbitrary Procrustean solution which dictates an order of acquisition through the artificial presentation of linguistic contents that do not meet the individual needs of each learner. This term has also been used in computing [10] and philosophy [8] as the alteration of the natural order in health and habitat to meet market standards and technology.



In this paper I criticise the linear order of acquisition proposed by the Procrustean approach, as well as the ergonomic philosophy as a solution to educational totalitarian agendas. I also examine the prognosis-led programme design, and the structuralist formal logic that guides their actions imposing didactic and transnational solutions.

## **2. Procrustes in the language classroom**

The curriculum in foreign language (FL) is decidedly Procrustean since its nature always imposes an order of acquisition, whether linear, stepwise in stages of achievement, or simply because it demands different cognitive styles and skill levels to "lie" in the same classroom denying the uniqueness and individuality of each learner, stretching or maiming their expressive potential. Precisely the guiding parameter of all these teaching programmes is the simplistic notion that climbing a series of tests whose gradual conquest will, hopefully, lead to the domain of the foreign language (FL) code. Lewis [5] rightly refutes such claim by asserting that: "No linear syllabus can adequately reflect the nonlinear nature of language acquisition."

In this line of thought, most mainstream methodologies as outlined in compendiums on curriculum development (vid. The Audio Lingual Method, Content-based, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia, Berlitz, Task-based, etc.), or even materials for self-taught learning (Assimil, Rosetta Stone, Inglés sin Barreras, Interchange, New English File, Cutting Edge, Summit, Alter Ego, Studio D, etc..) require on the part of faculty, staff and students, a blind adherence to the Procrustean moulding criterion whose guidelines are based on the unsubstantiated belief that following a progressive, laddering content presentation will provide results. Such belief was born out of the tradition of teaching natural and exact sciences, which orders an unaltered path to comprehend a knowledge base that will lead to more complex topics. This ascension is devised by the teacher, coordinator, director, department of education or ministry of each time.

This criticism is not a derogatory attempt to deny the potential contributions of corpus linguistics to language teaching. Conversely, the importance of this critical observation is to try to expose some philosophical, and psycholinguistic contradictions that emerge from teaching to alter an idiolect (for teaching a foreign language is the effort to expand a monolingual idiolect to become bilingual) by means of overlooking the nature of linguistic singularity.

The main pitfall that leads to overlooking the essence of each idiolect is in the social pressure upon education that forces it to show quantitative results. Exams, tests, quizzes, etc., are merely the yardsticks whereby education tries to prove itself in order to guarantee continuity in funding from public sources. The idiolect has been utterly neglected simply because the individual is neglected in the generalising view which dictates that large samples of test results are an objective indicator of efficiency. It is contrary to the logistics of education to expect individual yardsticks of assessment, as well as individual methodologies of language teaching, this logistic condition, nonetheless should not blur the real situation of human language learning, i.e. learning occurs exclusively in the human brain, and the human brain is always individual.

## **3. The curricular oracle. A forecast to programme design**

Another aspect emerging from the Procrustean curricular design is its strong tendency to predict the order of acquisition and thus of linguistic presentation in language courses. This type of prediction obeys rather general criteria such as frequency of use of a word (teaching articles and prepositions before verbs), semantic coverage (generality: insect rather than fly, and weapon instead of machinegun) when not the entirely arbitrary teacher intuition and her beliefs about what "should be taught" [3], [7].

The larger example we can find of prognosis is corpus linguistics applied to selected content. It is perhaps the par-excellence auxiliary language such as Basic English (Ogden, 1968), which takes the most frequent 850 words of English to give language learners a lexical basis. Its teaching principles and implementation are described in Basic English versus the artificial languages [6].

However, the main problem we found in content selection by prognosis (from large samples grouped into speech corpus linguistics), is precisely the generalizing view of language that does not reflect individual usage and therefore neglects individual needs. Teaching words, occurrences, or word placement out of a large speech sample, is to ignore that the acquisition does not result from the presentation of high frequency lexical units. To prove this, we have examples of late acquisition of highly frequent grammatical rules such as the suffix-s in third person singular present tense in English, or phrasal verbs in the same language (ask + pronoun + out; back + up + pronoun; chip in; pronoun + direct obj + come across). [1], [4].



Indeed, one can be taught the most used words in a language, yet if they are not the most used items by a learner living in a country where the target language is spoken, the risk of teaching to forget increases (due to low frequency of usage). On the other hand, learning morphosyntactic units that are not compatible with morphosyntactic units of high frequency in the native language of the learner requires the cognitive effort to encode new data from zero, with all its implications for teachers and learners alike.

Teaching syntactic lexical units taken from corpus means a huge burden on the learner that overloads their working memory and long-term potentiation for a correct coding process and, consequently, a successful decoding process. Imposing a non-idiolectal verbal behavior cast after the frequency patterns of generalization from corpora results in proposing a dual task whose demanding nature hinders a feasible achievement.

## 5. Conclusions

The curriculum cannot continue to impose forms of organization and content presentation because reality contradicts this course of action. Even obeying this ideal, curriculum acts as (or degenerates to) a cunning device of control to constrain information spreading in order to better manipulate its distribution. As Procrustes proceeded with his victims, the classroom and the curriculum is the bed where cognitive styles are amputated, compressed, or reduced with the hope of learning a foreign language.

The questions that remain to be answered are, who is exactly the Procrustes lifting the axe in education? What are his aims? Whom does he work for? What beliefs does he obey? In foreign language teaching it is about time to understand that the jacket ought to be cut according to the user's size... not the other way around. A proper curriculum would start by adopt ergonomic, flexible, context-adjustable principles, paying heed to background, interests and needs of each individual learner. Maybe its design and implementation can involve the downright rejection of bygone paradigms (assessment, ratings, grades, levels), and we should also unlearn everything that generations of educators have been comfortably repeating. That is why Thomas H. Huxley when talking about education once wrote "Every great advance in knowledge has naturally involved the absolute rejection of authority." [2]. In order to have true learning, it is necessary to start questioning the very roots of arbitrary external orders in education. The classroom as a Procrustean bed is meant to be re-examined from its foundations, granted that "No linear program can adequately reflect the nonlinear nature of language acquisition".

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