

SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR ELT CLASSROOMS



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SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR ELT CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This article aims at providing insights about designing syllabus for an ELT classroom. Several important aspects are discussed, including the distinction of the terms 'curriculum' and 'syllabus', the importance of syllabus in ELT, types of syllabus, syllabus design, as well as choosing and integrating syllabi. A practical guide to syllabus choice and design will be provided.

Keywords: syllabus, syllabus design, ELT

Introduction

Syllabus plays a very important role in teaching in general and language teaching in particular. An appropriate syllabus will help teacher and learner obtain the aims and objectives of an English course or in other words, it contributes a great deal to the success of an English course. The aspects of language teaching method which are closely related to syllabus are the theory of language, theory of learning and the learner type.

The choice of a syllabus is a major decision in language teaching, and it should be made as consciously and with as much information as possible. In order to see the important role of syllabus in the English Language Teaching (ELT) setting, this article will highlight several issues related to the topic. The first section will discuss about the distinction between the terms 'curriculum' and 'syllabus'. Then, it will address the importance of syllabus in ELT. Some other issues to be covered include types of syllabus, syllabus design, as well as choosing and integrating syllabi. Finally, a practical guide to syllabus choice and design will be provided.

Syllabus and Curriculum: The distinction

Questions often arise concerning the distinction between the terms curriculum and syllabus. Hadley (1998) mentions that part of the confusion stems from the North American understanding of the term curriculum, which is often used interchangeably with syllabus. Both can be used in America to mean teachers' requirements for a particular course. Besides, both curriculum and syllabus are two major documents necessarily prepared in a course design task. However, some scholars differentiate these two terms. Nunan (1988) believes that curriculum is a wider term as compared with syllabus. Curriculum covers all the activities and arrangements made by the

institution throughout the academic year to facilitate the learners and the instructors; whereas syllabus is limited to particular subject of a particular class. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) distinguish these two as to a curriculum basically describes the broadest contexts in which planning for language instruction takes place, but a syllabus is a more circumscribed document, usually one which has been prepared for a particular group of learners. Thus, a syllabus is more specific and more concrete than a curriculum, and a curriculum may contain a number of syllabi. Additionally, Krahnke (1987) points out that a curriculum may specify only the goals – what the learners will be able to do at the end of the instruction – while the syllabus specifies the content of the lessons used to lead the learners to achieve the goals. Content or what is taught is the single aspect of syllabus design to be considered. It includes behavioral or learning objectives for students, specifications of how the content will be taught and how it will be evaluated.

The Importance of Syllabus in ELT

Yalden (1984:14) mentions that syllabus can be seen as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of ‘fit’ between the needs and aims of the learner (as social being and as individual), and the activities which will take place in the classroom. It is thus a necessity in terms of providing educational services to the community to which the teacher is responsible.

A syllabus is required in order to provide efficiency of two kinds, which are pragmatic efficiency and pedagogical efficiency. Pragmatic efficiency basically deals with aspects related to economy of time and money; while pedagogical efficiency relates to the management of the learning process.

To simplify, syllabus can serve as means of control of the learning process.

Types of Syllabus

According to Krahnke (1987), there are six types of language teaching syllabus including:

1. **A structural (or formal) syllabus.** It is one in which the content of language teaching is a collection of the forms and structures, usually grammatical, of the language being taught. Examples of structure include: nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, complex sentences, subordinate clauses, past

tense, and so on, although formal syllabi may include other aspects of language form such as pronunciation or morphology.

2. **A notional/functional syllabus.** It is one in which the content of language teaching is a collection of the functions that are performed when language is used, or of the notions that language is used to express. Examples of functions include: informing, agreeing, apologizing, requesting, promising, and so on. Examples of notions include size, age, color, comparison, time, and so on.
3. **A situational syllabus.** It is one in which the content of language teaching is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. A situation usually involves several participants who are engaged in some activity in a specific setting. The language occurring in the situation involves a number of functions, combined into a plausible segment of discourse. The primary purpose of situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in the situations. Sometimes the situations are purposely relevant to the present or future needs of the language learners, preparing them to use the new language in the kinds of situations that make up the syllabus. Examples of situations include: seeing then dentist, complaining to the landlord, buying a book at the bookstore, meeting a new student, asking directions in a new town, and so on.
4. **A skill-based syllabus.** It is one in which the content of language teaching is a collection of specific abilities that may play a part in using language. Skills are things that people must be able to do to be competent in a language, relatively independently of the situation or setting in which the language use can occur. While situational syllabi group functions together into specific settings of language use, skill-based syllabi group linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, sociolinguistic, and discourse) together into generalized types of behavior, such as listening to spoken language for the main idea, writing well-formed paragraphs, giving effective oral presentations, taking language tests, reading texts for main ideas or supporting details, and so on. The primary purpose of skill-based instruction is to learn a specific language skill. A possible secondary purpose is to develop more general competence in the language, learning only incidentally any information that may be available while applying the language skills.

5. **A task-based syllabus.** It is similar to content-based syllabus in that both the teaching is not organized around linguistic features of the language being learned but according to some other organizing principle. In task-based instruction the content of the teaching is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students want or need to perform with the language they are learning. The tasks are defined as activities with a purpose other than language learning, but, as in a content-based syllabus, the performance of the tasks is approached in a way that is intended to develop second/foreign language ability. Language learning is subordinated to task performance, and language teaching occurs only as the need arises during the performance of a given task. Tasks integrate language (and other) skills in specific settings of language use. They differ from situations in that while situational teaching has the goal of teaching the specific language content that occurs in the situation – a predefined product – task-based teaching has the goal of teaching students to draw on resources to complete some piece of work – a process. The language students draw on a variety of language forms, functions, and skills, often in an individual and unpredictable way, in completing the tasks. Tasks that can be used for language learning are, generally, tasks that the learners actually have to perform in any case. Examples are applying for a job, talking with a social worker, getting housing information over the telephone, completing bureaucratic forms, collecting information about preschools to decide which to send a child to, preparing a paper for another course, reading a textbook for another course, and so on.
6. **A content-based syllabus.** It is not really a language teaching syllabus at all. In content-based language teaching, the primary purpose of the instruction is to teach some content or information using the language that the students are also learning. The students are simultaneously language students and students of whatever content is being taught. The subject matter is primary, and language learning occurs incidentally to the content learning. The content teaching is not organized around the language teaching, but vice versa. Content-based language teaching is concerned with information, while task-based language teaching is concerned with communicative and cognitive processes. An example of content-based language teaching is a science class taught in the language that the students need or want to learn, possibly with

linguistic adjustments to make the science more comprehensible. In practice, of course, these different types rarely occur independently of each other. Almost all actual language teaching syllabi are combinations of two or more of the types of syllabus described here.

Syllabus Design

Brown (1995) defines syllabus design as selection and organization of instructional content including suggested strategy for presenting content and evaluation. According to Webb (in Kaur, 1990), syllabus design is the organization of the selected contents into an ordered and practical sequence for teaching purposes. Thus, syllabus design can be said to practically relate to the principles involved in planning and designing an effective syllabus. Kaur (1995) sets five criteria for syllabus design as: progress from known to unknown matter, appropriate size of teaching units, a proper variety of activity, teachability, and creating a sense of purpose for the student. Two important variables have been considered the most relevant for an EFL syllabus design are linguistic variables and non-linguistic variables (Halim in Kaur, 1990). The linguistic variables refer to the linguistic relations between the language to be taught (English) and the language or languages which the learners use in their daily activities. Meanwhile, the non-linguistic variables deal with various aspects, such as policy to social, cultural, technological, and administrative variables.

Choosing and Integrating Syllabi

The term syllabus, as used here, does not refer to a document guiding the teaching of a specific language course, but to a more theoretical notion of the types of content involved in language teaching and the bases for the organization of language courses.

In the preceding part, six types of syllabus content were defined and described as ideal or isolated types. In actual teaching settings, of course, it is rare for one type of syllabus or content to be used exclusively of other types. Syllabus or content types are usually combined in more or less integrated ways, with one type as the organizing basis around which the others are arranged and related. For example, many foreign language courses are organized around a structural syllabus, with each unit or chapter focusing on several grammatical features. Accompanying the grammatical focus and

organization, however, are other types of content, usually situational (dialogues) and functional (how to introduce yourself).

Basic syllabus design involves several questions. The first question concerns the types of content to include or exclude. The second is whether to combine various types of syllabus content or to rely on a single type. The third, assuming that more than one type of content will be included, is whether to use one type as basic and to organize others around it, or to sequence each type more or less independently of the other. In discussing syllabus choice and design, then, it should be kept in mind that the issue is not which type to choose but which types, and how to relate them to each other. Before this issue is discussed, three factors that affect the choice of syllabus or content in language teaching—program, teacher, and students—are examined.

It may be that some situational or Functional content can be included with the objective of providing the learners with the formulas and routines they need for immediate and specific communication, and other types of instruction can be used to foster their overall language acquisition.

A Practical Guide to Syllabus Choice and Design

Reilly (1988) suggests ten steps in preparing a practical language teaching syllabus, as follows:

- 1) Determine, to the extent possible, what out-comes are desired for the students in the instructional program. That is, as exactly and realistically as .possible, define what the students should be able to do as a result of the instruction.
- 2) Rank the syllabus types presented here as to their likelihood of leading to the outcomes desired. Several rankings may be necessary if outcomes are complex.
- 3) Evaluate available resources in expertise (for teaching, needs analysis, materials choice and production, etc.), in materials, and in training for teachers.
- 4) Rank the syllabi relative to available resources. That is, determine what syllabus types would be the easiest to implement given available resources.

- 5) Compare the lists made under Nos. 2 and 4. Making as few adjustments to the earlier list as possible, produce a new ranking based on the resources constraints.
- 6) Repeat the process, taking into account the constraints contributed by teacher and student factors described earlier.
- 7) Determine a final ranking, taking into account all the information produced by the earlier steps.
- 8) Designate one or two syllabus types as dominant and one or two as secondary
- 9) Review the question of combination or integration of syllabus type and determine how combination will be achieved and in what proportion.
- 10) Translate decisions into actual teaching units.

This guide is intended as a general procedure to follow in making syllabus decisions for specific instructional programs. It is expected that quite different designs will emerge for each application, and this is as it should be. What is important in making practical decisions about syllabus design is that all possible factors that might affect the teachability of the syllabus be taken into account. This can be done only at the program level.

Conclusion

The article has outlined some common issues related to syllabus design for an ELT setting. Several key notions need to be taken into consideration before coming up with decision on the syllabus type to be implemented in the classroom. As the one who directly involves in the process of syllabus design, a language instructor/teacher needs to firstly clear about the difference between the term ‘curriculum’ and ‘syllabus’ which tend to be used interchangeably. Curriculum is a wider term as compared with syllabus. Curriculum covers all the activities and arrangements made by the institution throughout the academic year to facilitate the learners and the instructors; whereas syllabus is limited to particular subject of a particular class. Syllabus is an important component in a language classroom since it serves to provide both pragmatic and pedagogical efficiency. ELT practitioners may choose from six different types of syllabus to use, or they may choose to integrate the syllabi by considering Reilly’s 10 steps for practical guide to syllabus choice and design.

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