Influential Types of Syllabuses Within Educational Contexts

Mohammad Mohseni Far

Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran

Abstract: The present study is aimed to inquire rather critically into the essentials and issues central to the prominent types of syllabuses utilized in the educational contexts and field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Accordingly, each syllabus is presented and meticulously examined in a nutshell. In doing so, the researcher tries to outline the major points pertinent to each particle syllabus in order for setting up an umbrella and compact sketch covering the paramount information for syllabus designers and practitioners. The significant proposal underlying this study is that a syllabus needs to be flexible, practical and possible to be designed and implemented. This is due to the fact that the requirements and conditions of each educational setting are so idiosyncratic and distinctive that make the design and selection of syllabus more difficult – much less to its integration and even implementation. It is also hoped that the instructors take best advantage of available issue and arguments so as to better evaluate their own syllabuses, course books and programs.

Key words: Influential, syllabuses, educational context, ELT

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, it seems of great importance to define the term syllabus in order to have a better understanding of what it actually means and to which aspects and dimensions of ELT it is related. Of course, it should be noted that there are many challenges concerning the unique and even proper defining and elaborating on the concept syllabus. For example, during the recent years, the focus of syllabuses has shifted away from structure to situations, functions and notions to topics and tasks. That is why, as Nunan (1988) highlights; with the development of the latter obviously "the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology has become blurred". Accordingly, though it is a little hard on initial appearance to describe syllabus, it seems possible to make an attempt to define syllabus at least in an understandable way. In Wilkin's (1981) words, syllabuses are "specifications of the content of language teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering with the aim of making teaching and learning a more effective process." A syllabus can also be seen as "a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning" (Breen, 1984a) while its function is "to specify what is to be taught and in what order" (Prabhu, 1984). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define syllabus as at its simplest level "as a statement of what is to be learnt". They further add that it reflects of language and linguistic performance. Yalden (1987) also refers to syllabus as a "summary of the

content to which learners will be exposed". Candlin (1984) suggests a different perspective implying that syllabuses are "social constructions, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners. They are concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners." Finally, in simple words, a language teaching syllabus involves the combination of subject matter (what to teach) and linguistic matter (how to teach). It actually performs as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be accomplished. Syllabus, in fact, deals with linguistic theory and theories of language learning and how they are utilized in the classroom.

Since, the design of a syllabus depend upon what is taught and in what order, the theory of language basic to the language teaching methodology plays a paramount part in choosing what syllabus is needed to be adopted. The choice of a syllabus is a key decision in language teaching and it should be made carefully and on the basis of reliable and authentic information. There has been much challenge during recent years regarding what different types of content are possible in language teaching syllabuses and as to whether the differences are in syllabus or method. Based on the present survey, several influential types of language teaching syllabuses are introduced, i.e., 13 ones in here and these different types may be utilized in different teaching situations.

SYLLABUSES IN ELT

Syllabi are not totally distinct from each other. All actual language teaching syllabuses are integrated product of 2 or more of the types of syllabi presented here. In other words, although different language teaching syllabuses are introduced here as though each can be employed on its own, in practice, these syllabuses rarely occur independently of each other. For a particular course, one type of syllabus usually dominates, while other types of content might be integrated with it. For instance, there is minimal distinction between the skill-based and task-based syllabuses. In fact, the way in which the instructional content is employed in the real teaching procedure is the determining element in choosing a syllabus. The characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of individual syllabuses are investigated in a nutshell as follows.

A procedural syllabus: The procedural syllabus was proposed by Prabhu (1980). Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' was based on the premise that structure can be best learned when attention is concentrated on meaning. The focus shifts from the linguistic aspect to the pedagogical one focusing on learning or learner. The tasks and activities are designed and planned in advance but not the linguistic content. In this syllabus, tasks are graded conceptually and grouped by similarity. Within such a framework the selection, ordering and grading of content is not so much considerable for the syllabus designer. Arranging the course around tasks such as information- and opinion-gap activities helps the learner perceive the language subconsciously while consciously focusing on solving the meaning behind the tasks.

Meaning is attached by great importance rather than form. On the basis of communicative language teaching, the fundamental learning theory of task-based highlights that activities, in which language is employed to complete meaningful tasks, enhance learning. To put another way, the learner dynamically involves in working out, understanding, relating or conveying messages. Besides, there is no syllabus in terms of vocabulary or structure and no presentation of language items.

A cultural syllabus: Stern (1992) introduces 'cultural syllabus' to be incorporated into second/foreign language education. There are many challenges regarding defining the concept of culture. Seelye (1984) refused to define culture, calling it 'a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man' and Brown (1994) calls it the "glue" that binds a group of people together. In order to have a better understanding of the term culture, Stern (1992) suggests that writers 'have tried to reduce the vast and amorphous nature of the culture concept to

manageable proportions by preparing lists of items or by indicating a few broad categories'. Stern keeps on by discounting such lists as presented by Brooks and Chastain as providing only 'cultural titbits'. Nostrand's (1978) emergent model is praised by Stern as an attempt to overcome this, as is Seelye's (1984) observation that all of mankind have the same needs and that different groups will satisfy these needs in different ways, as this gives a viewpoint for studying culture. However, Stern also implies that although both Nostrand's and Seelye's work give a viewpoint, they are difficult to be put in practice. Hammerly (1982) suggests a mix of anthropological culture and classical culture. He highlights three areas, i.e., information culture, behavioural culture and achievement culture. Stern believes this to be valuable, but claims that it does not solve the problem of the range of cultural topics.

Believing in the fact that there is a consensus on the objectives of teaching culture, Stern (1992) indicates that aims should be:

- A research-minded outlook.
- The learner's own country.
- Knowledge about the target culture.
- Affective goals; interest, intellectual curiosity and empathy.
- Awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture.
- Emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use.

Stern also points out that the consensus shows that teaching culture is more akin to social studies or literature and this has resulted in a syllabus that is so broad; it seems to have become disconnected from its objectives.

A situational syllabus: In this type of syllabus, the essential component of organization is a non-linguistic category, i.e., the situation. The underlying premise is that language is related to the situational contexts in which it occurs. The designer of a situational syllabus tries to predict those situations in which the learner will find him/herself and applies these situations, for instance; seeing the dentist, going to cinema and meeting a new student, as a basis for selecting and presenting language content. The content of language teaching is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. A situation usually includes several participants who are involved in some activity in a particular setting. The language used in the situation comprises a number of functions combined into a plausible part of available discourse. The main principle of a situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in the situations.

In this syllabus, situational needs are important rather than grammatical units. The major organizing feature is a list of situations which reflects the way language and behavior are used everyday outside the classroom. Thus, by connecting structural theory to situations the learner is able to induce the meaning from a relevant context. One advantage of the situational approach is that motivation will be heightened since it is "learner- rather than subject-centered" (Wilkins, 1976).

A skill-based syllabus: Skills are abilities that people must be able to do to be competent enough in a language, rather independently of the situation or context in which the language use can occur. In this syllabus, the content of the language teaching involves a collection of particular skills that may play a role in using language. Although situational syllabuses combine functions together into specific settings of language use, skill-based syllabi merge linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and discourse) together into generalized types of behavior, such as listening to spoken language for the main idea, writing well-formed paragraphs, delivering effective lectures and so forth. The chief rationale behind skill-based instruction is to learn the specific language skill. Another less important objective might be to develop more general competence in the language, learning only incidentally any information that may be available while utilizing the language skills.

A structural or formal syllabus: This is recognized as the traditional syllabus which is often organized along grammatical lines giving primacy to language form. The focus is on the outcomes or the product. It is, in fact, a grammatical syllabus in which the selection and grading of the content is on the basis of the complexity and simplicity of grammatical items. In other words, it specifies structural patterns as the basic units of learning and organizes these according to such criteria as structural complexity, difficulty, regularity, utility and frequency. The learner is expected to master each structural step and add it to his/her grammar collection. It makes ample use of highly controlled, tightly structured and sequenced pattern practice drills.

A multi-dimensional syllabus: Since, there is no serious rationale behind the selection of only one of the inventory item types necessary to be chosen as a unit of organization. It is possible to design a syllabus involving lessons of varying orientation; for example, some including important functions, others dealing with situations and topics and yet others with notions and structures. The underlying principle is that there should be flexibility to change the central point of the teaching material as the course unfolds. This will lead to a syllabus design which is flexible, less rigid and more responsive to the various student language needs.

A task-based syllabus: A task-based syllabus supports using tasks and activities to encourage learners to utilize the language communicatively so as to achieve a purpose. It indicates that speaking a language is a skill best perfected through interaction and practice. The most important point is that tasks must be relevant to the real world language needs of the learner. It should be a meaningful task so as to enhance learning. The content of the teaching is a series of multifaceted and focused tasks that the students want or need to perform with the aid of the language they are learning. Tasks combine language and other skills in specific contexts of language use.

Since, language learning is considered subordinate to task performance and language teaching also occurs just as the need arises during the performance of a particular task, the tasks are best defined as activities with a purpose other than language learning so as to develop second language ability.

The difference between task-based teaching and situation-based teaching lies in the fact that while situational teaching has the end of teaching the specific language content that occurs in the situation, i.e., a predefined product, task-based teaching has the purpose of teaching learners to draw on resources to complete some piece of work, i.e. a process. The learners employ a variety of language functions, forms and skills, often in an individual and unpredictable way, in completing the tasks.

A process syllabus: The actual syllabus is designed as the teaching and learning proceeds. This type of syllabus was supported by Breen (1984 a,b) whereby a framework can be provided within which either a pre-designed content syllabus can be publicly analyzed and evaluated by the classroom group, or a developing content syllabus can be designed in an on-going way. It supports a frame for decisions and alternative procedures, activities and tasks for the classroom group. It explicitly attends to teaching and learning and particularly the possible interrelationships between subject matter, learning and the potential contributions of a classroom.

A learner-led syllabuses: Breen and Candlin (1984) were the first ones proposed the belief of basing an approach on how learners learn. The emphasis is upon the learner, who it is hoped will be engaged in the implementation of

the syllabus design as far as that is practically possible. The learners' awareness of the course they are studying helps them increase their interest and motivation, attached with the positive effect of developing the skills required to learn.

A predetermined and prearranged syllabus provides support and guidance for the instructor and should not be so simply dismissed. The opponents of this view indicate that a learner-led syllabus seems far-reaching, radical and utopian in that it will be complicated to follow as the direction of the syllabus will be mostly the responsibility of the students. Moreover, without the support of a course book, a lack of aims may come about.

A proportional syllabus: This type of syllabus is basically practical and its focus is upon flexibility and spiral technique of language sequencing leading to the recycling of language. The proportional syllabus mainly tries to develop an overall competence. It seems appropriate and applicable for learners who lack exposure to the target language beyond the classroom.

Specifically speaking, this syllabus comprises a variety of elements with theme playing a linking part through the units. This theme is chosen by the learners. At first, the form is of essential value, but later the emphasis will turn towards interactional elements. The shift frol form to interaction can occur at any time and is not restricted to a particular level of learner ability. The dominant view in designing a proportional syllabus centers around the premise that a syllabus has to indicate explicitly what will be taught, rather than what will be learned. In closing, the rationale behind designing such a syllabus is to develop a type of syllabus that is dynamic with ample opportunity for feedback and flexibility.

A content-based-syllabus: The syllabus is intended to design a type of instruction in which the crucial goal is to teach specific information and content using the language that the learners are also learning. Although, the subject matter is of primary and vital importance, language learning occurs concurrently with the content learning. The learners are at the same time language students and learners of whatever content and information is being taught. As compared with the task-based approach of language teaching that is connected with communicative and cognitive processes, content-based language teaching deals with information. This syllabus can be exemplified by assuming a chemistry class in which chemistry is taught in the language the learners need or want to learn, possibly with linguistic adjustment to make the chemistry more understandable.

A notional/functional syllabus: The chief emphasis of this syllabus is upon the communicative purpose and conceptual meaning of language i.e. *notions* and *functions*. In other words, the content of the language teaching is a number of the *functions* that are performed on using the language, or of the *notions* that language is utilized to express. Functions can be exemplified by instances such as inviting, requesting, agreeing, apologizing and notions embrace age, color, size, comparison, time, etc. Besides, grammatical items and situational elements are considered at subsidiary level of importance. As apposed to the hypothesis of structural and situational syllabuses which lies in the fact that it is most often in search of 'how' or 'when' and 'where' of language (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979), the functional/notional syllabus seeks for 'what is a learner communicates through language'.

An important point regarding notional-functional syllabus is that the needs of the students have to be explored and analyzed by different types of interaction and communication a learner may be involved in. Accordingly, needs analysis is central to the design of notional-functional syllabuses. Needs analysis should be taken into account so as to establish the necessary objectives. Apart from needs analysis that has an implicit focus on the learner, this type of syllabus proposes a new list consisting of notions and functions that become the main focus in a syllabus. White (1988) argues that "language functions do not usually occur in isolation" and there are also difficulties of selecting and grading function and form.

A lexical syllabus: As one of the advocates of lexical syllabus, Willis (1990) asserts that "taking lexis as a starting point enabled us to identify the commonest meanings and patterns in English and to offer students a picture which is typical of the way English is used". He continued to claim that they were able to follow through the work of Wilkins and his colleagues in their attempt to establish a notional syllabus. They also were able to suggest students a way of referencing the language they had experienced. Thus learners were able to use their corpus in the same way as grammarians and lexicographers use a corpus in order to make valid and relevant generalizations about the language under study.

Specifically speaking, Willis' lexical syllabus is firmly based on real language. It draws on the COBUILD research which provides an analysis of a corpus of natural language of twenty million words. The COBUILD corpus provides the content of the lexical syllabus, the commonest words and phrases in English and their

meanings. It also provides some insights into that content which modifies and shapes the way syllabus designers treat the language in the course books. Thus, the picture of the language one pictures in designing such a syllabus is quite distinct from what one might present intuitively. In fact, intuition on its own cannot identify the most frequent words and phrases of the language, or even recognize their importance. Previously, the course writer's reliance on intuition has resulted in misrepresentations in the handling with the language. The proposed lexical syllabus is actually based on a body of research into natural language rather than other pedagogic grammars. The result is to put forward a more complete pedagogic description of the language and a better balanced description as well.

Course books considering other course books as their starting point actually employ the strengths of accumulated experience. But unless they go back to look at language as it is, they are likely to bring about the failings of other courses. They spend an excessive amount of time on the verb phrase and disregard other important features of language (Willis, 1990). The result of such a particular standpoint is that the lexical syllabus designer takes not only a lexical description as his/her starting point, but also checks the course content against other courses by checking against the TEFL Side Corpus.

One of the most significant features on designing such a syllabus is the shift of responsibility for learning onto the learner. Instead of offering discrete patterns to the learner, we enabled the learner to experience a corpus of language which is in many ways typical of the language as a whole and to learn from examining and analyzing this corpus. By exposing learners to carefully selected language and by arming them with analyzing that language for themselves, the syllabus helps the learners successfully achieve their goals. Specifically speaking, it is the issue of a dynamic element in the process that is the learner's creativity. In fact, by exploiting the creativity, the learning is vastly made more efficient.

CONCLUSION

There are many essential points when considering a syllabus to be designed and implemented. The various syllabi touched on in this investigation all present valuable insights into creating a language program and course. Although, the thirteen types of syllabus were examined and defined here as if in isolated contexts, it is uncommon for one type of syllabus to be utilized fully in actual teaching settings. Syllabuses are frequently combined in more or less integrated ways with one type as the organizing starting point around which the others

are arranged and connected. To put another way, in arguing about syllabus choice and design, it should be kept in mind that the question is not which type to choose but which types and how to connect them with each other. Finally and perhaps preferably, a hybrid syllabus needs to be constructed and designed due to pragmatic reasons. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state "it is wise to take an eclectic approach, taking what is useful from each theory and trusting also in the evidence of your own experience as a teacher".

It should be also noted that the flexibility or rigidity of a syllabus depends so much on the objectives it is going to achieve. Critically reviewing a syllabus, a designer has to consider the objectives of the course as well as the needs of the learners. Most inexperienced instructors prefer a "rigid" syllabus which obviously prescribes everything that has to be done and how. On the other hand, experienced teachers have a preference for both freedom and responsibility and thus a more flexible syllabus.

In closing, this point is attached by great importance that no single type of syllabus is appropriate for all teaching settings. This is due to the fact that the needs and conditions of each setting are so characteristic and idiosyncratic that particular proposals for integration are not easily possible. The possibility and practicality aspects of a particular syllabus to be developed and implemented are of great significance while processing the issue. To put in more tangible terms, in making practical decisions about syllabus design, one must take into account all the potential factors that may affect the teachability of a specific syllabus. By beginning with an assessment and investigation over each syllabus type, keeping track of the choice and integration of the different types according to local needs, one may find a principled and practical solution to the problem of suitability and efficiency in syllabus design and implementation. The investigation on how subtly and carefully a syllabus can be designed and implemented opens a new horizon for the future research.

REFERENCES

Breen, M.P., 1984a. Process Syllabuses for the Language Classroom. In: Brumfit, C.J. (Ed.), General English Syllabus Design Pergamon Press Ltd. and the British Council.

Breen, M.P., 1984b. Process In Syllabus Design and Classroom Language Learning. In: C.J. Brumfit (Ed.), General English Syllabus Design. ELT Documents No. 118. London: Pergamon Press and The British Council.

Brown, H.D., 1994. Teaching by Principles. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Regents.

Brumfit, C.J. and K. Johnson, 1979. The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. Oxford: OUP.

Candlin, C.N., 1984. Applying a System Approach to Curriculum Innovation in the Public Sector. In: Read, J.A.S. (Ed.), Trends in Language Syllabus Design. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

Hammerly, H., 1982. Synthesis in language teaching. Blaine, WA: Second Language Publications.

Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters, 1987. English for Specific Purposes: A Learning Centred Approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nostrand, H., 1978. The 'emergent model' structured inventory of a sociocultural system applied to contemporary France. Contemporary French Civilization II, ii, pp: 277-294.

Nunan, D., 1988. Syllabus Design. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Prabhu, N.S., 1980. Reactions and Predictions (Special issue). Bangalore: Regional Institute of English, South India, Bulletin 4 (1).

Prabhu, N.S., 1984. Procedural Syllabuses. In: Read, J.A.S. (Ed.), Trends in Language Syllabus Design. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

Seelye, H., 1984. Teaching Culture: Strategies for inter-cultural Communication. Revised edition. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Stern, H.H., 1992. Issues and Options in Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White, R.V., 1988. The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation and Management. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wilkins, D.A., 1976. Notional Syllabuses. London: Oxford University Press.

Wilkins, D.A., 1981. Notional Syllabuses Revisited. Applied Linguistics, II, pp: 83-89.

Willis, D., 1990. The Lexical Syllabus: A New Approach to Language Teaching. London: COBUILD.

Yalden, J., 1987. Principles of Course Design for Language Teaching. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.