# Designing Approaches and Procedure of Syllabus

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the current approaches on syllabus design and explores the procedure of designing a syllabus involving three steps: classifying goals, selecting materials and sequencing materials, as well as key points of the factors to be considered each steps.

**Key words:** Task-based; Syllabus; Design

## INTRODUCTION

### Definition of Syllabus

A syllabus is an expression of opinion on the nature of language and learning; it acts as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be attained. At its simplest level a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learnt at reflects of language and linguistic performance (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It can also be seen as a "summary of the content to which learners will be exposed" (Yalden, 1987, 87). It is seen as an approximation of what will be taught and that it cannot accurately predict what will be learnt. Next, we will discuss the various types of approaches available to course designers and the language assumptions they make.

# 1. CURRENT TRENDS ON SYLLABUS DESIGN

## 1.1 Structural Approach

Traditionally, the content of a language course has been specified in terms of the linguistic items to be taught. The type of syllabus that results from this approach to course design has been variously labeled, and most frequently used term is "linguistic". A linguistic syllabus focuses on "what is to be learned"; with the feature of "interventionist" and "external to the learner", consisting of a graded list of grammatical structures.

## 1.2 Notional/Functional Approach

An alternative approach, based on theories of communicative competence and functional grammar, involves identifying the linguistic exponents for performing notions and functions which plays an essential role on a linguistic syllabus as it involves specifying the linguistic content to be taught and it is still essentially interventionist and external to the learner. Thus, the shift from structural to notional/functional syllabuses did not involve any radical rethinking about the basic type of syllabus, although it did make it easier to designing courses based on learners' needs, as these could be specified much more clearly in terms of notions/functions than linguistic structures.

## 1.3 Procedural/Task-Based Approaches

Prabhu (1987) argued that it was necessary to abandon the pre-selection of linguistic items in any form and instead specify the content of teaching in terms of holistic units of communication, i.e., tasks. In this way, he claimed it would be possible to teach "through communication" rather than "for communication". Prabhu's procedural

syllabus was a first attempt to develop a syllabus on such grounds. The syllabus consisted of a set of tasks, sequenced according to difficulty. Interestingly, it was developed for use in secondary schools in southern India, a challenging context for what was then an innovatory approach to language teaching. Prabhu's tasks were problem-oriented and designed to be intellectually challenging in order to engage learners and sustain their interest.

A somewhat different approach to task-based teaching has been advanced by Long (1985). Like Prabhu, Long explicitly grounds his proposal on a theory of L2 acquisition but the theory differs in one key respect. Whereas Prabhu views language acquisition as an implicit process that takes place when learners are grappling with the effort to communicate, Long emphasizes the need for learners to attend to form consciously while they are communicating—what he calls "focus on form". Tasks, then, have to be designed in ways that will ensure a primary focus on meaning but also allow for incidental attention to form. Building on Long's claim about the importance of focusing on form while learners are engaged in processing for meaning. Doughty (2001) examines the psycholinguistic mechanisms for achieving this. She argues that speech processing provides windows of opportunity for drawing attention to form while learners are planning utterances. However, such pedagogical interventions, which Doughty refers to as "cognitive intrusions", must facilitate rather than interrupt natural language processing to be effective. This is the case, she suggests, with recasts that focus contingently and intensively on the specific learner errors that arise in the course of attempts to communicate.

Long also advances proposals for using tasks in courses for specific purposes. He distinguishes what he calls target tasks and pedagogic tasks and argues that to ensure the relevance of a task-based syllabus the starting point is a needs analysis to establish the target tasks that a specific group of learners need to be able to perform. For long, "task" is the ideal unit for specifying the content of specific purpose courses because it most closely reflects what learners need to do with the language.

It can be seen, then, that the rationale for task-based syllabuses that have been advanced by a variety of arguments. First the foremost it is premised on the theoretical view that the instruction needs to be compatible with the cognitive processes involved in L2 acquisition. Second, as in the case of Prabhu, the importance of learner "engagement" is emphasized tasks, as long as they provide a "reasonable challenge", will be cognitively involving and motivating. Third, tasks serve as a suitable unit for specifying learners' needs and thus for designing specific purpose courses.

However, this rationale for task-based teaching can be challenged on a number of fronts. First the dismissal of linguistic syllabuses on the grounds that learners do not learn the grammatical structures that they are taught may be unwarranted. Early studies of the effects of form-focused instruction (for example, Ellis, 1983; Lightbown, 1983; Pica, 1983), whose findings achieved axiomatic status, did point to this conclusion. However, it is suggested that learners can achieve clear gains in accuracy as a result of being taught a structure, especially if the type of form-focused instruction is planned in accordance with what is known about aquisitional processes. There is now clear evidence that instruction of the focus-on-form kind can influence the accuracy with which learners use the targeted features, even in unplanned language use. (Ellis, 2002). The noted failure of linguistic syllabuses may have had more to do with how the syllabuses were implemented, i.e., with their methodology, than with their design.

Second, the claims regarding the effectiveness of task-based learning have been challenged. Sheen (1994) observes that if immersion programmes have failed to achieve high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence despite the thousands of hours of instruction they afford, one can only be skeptical of what might be achieved by the far fewer hours available in a second or foreign language course based on tasks. However, this criticism takes no account of Long's argument that task-based teaching needs to incorporate attention to form. Sheen also notes that there is actually no empirical evidence that task-based teaching works and that Long and Crooke's advocacy of it is based entirely on theoretical arguments. However, while it is true that no study has demonstrated that task-based teaching results in higher levels of language proficiency than teaching based on traditional linguistic syllabuses, there is some evidence that a meaning-centered approach is effective in developing proficiency and there is growing experimental evidence that the attention to form that arises from the negotiation of meaning in task-based activity promotes acquisition.

Obviously, each of the above types of syllabuses has its merits and drawbacks (Nunan, 1988; Richards, 2001). Each was developed with inspirations from linguistic and/or educational studies. Some of these have been used longer and more widely than the others. However, Task-based syllabuses conforming to what is known about acquisitional processes is considered as an alternative to linguistic syllabuses design.

## 1.4 Inclusion of Non-Linguistic Objectives in Syllabus

Compared with traditional syllabuses, the later models usually include a list of non-linguistic objectives, such as learning strategies and affective cultivation. Richards (2001) refers to these objectives as non-language outcomes, which include affect cultivation (such as confidence, motivation and interest), learning strategies, thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and cultural understanding. The underlying assumption behind this trend in syllabus design is that, as a school

subject, language education should not merely aim at helping students to maters language knowledge and skills. Rather, it has responsibility in foster students' whole-person development, which includes not only intellectual development but also affect, cultural understanding and learning strategies.

### 1.5 Emergence of the Multi-Syllabus

Given the fact that none of the existing types of syllabuses is any better than the others, "decisions about a suitable syllabus framework for a [language] course reflect different priorities in teaching rather than absolute choices…. In most courses there will generally be a number of different syllabus strands, such as grammar linked to skills and texts, tasks linked to topics and functions, or skills linked to topics and texts" (Richards, 2001, p.164, italics original). Therefore, the integrated syllabus came into being, which is also called the muli-syllabus. Designing a multi-syllabus does not mean the simple combination of elements from different types of syllabuses. Rather, it is a matter of choice of priority.

Currently, the practice of adhering to one type of syllabus throughout the language program is rare. Rather syllabus designers tend to resort to multi-syllabus. There are two ways for syllabus designers to do so. First, they can design a multi-syllabus, incorporating features of currently popular syllabuses. Second, they can choose to adopt a different type for the different stages of the program. For example, [a] syllabus might be organized grammatically at the first level and then the grammar presented functionally. Or the first level of organization might be functional with grammar items selected according to the grammatical demands of different functions (Richards, 2001, p.164).

## 2. PROCEDURES FOR CONSTRUCTING A SYLLABUS

A complete syllabus specification will include all five aspects: structure, function, situation, topic, skills. The difference between syllabuses will lie in the priority given to each of these aspects.

### 2.1 Classifying Goals

Goals come in many shapes and forms. They can refer to cognitive and affective aspects of the learner's development, what the teacher hopes to achieve in the classroom, what the teacher hopes the learners will achieve in the classroom, the real-world communicative tasks the learners should be able to perform as a result of instruction, and so on.

Goals can be derived directly from the learners or from syllabus designers through introspecting on the sorts of communicative purposes for which language is used (Nunan,2001). While classifying the goals several aspects should be taken into consideration: learning skills, linguistic skills, pragmatic skills, sociolinguistic skills, or literature skills.

### 2.2 Selecting Materials

The designer needs to make a broad selection of material types and to specify the particular themes the materials will deal with.

There are various "gap" materials, for example, information-gap and opinion-gap materials, which are also sometimes referred to in terms of how the information has been organized, i.e., split versus shared information materials. There are also reciprocal and non-reciprocal materials, i.e., materials that require or do not require interaction to achieve the outcome. Materials can be labeled according to the kind of activity they require of the learner, for example, role-play materials and decision-making materials, or according to the language skill they focus on, for example listening materials or writing materials. They can be named according to the type of discourse they are intended to elicit, for example a narrative or descriptive material, or according to the input materials they involve. Such diversity in nomenclature points to the richness of the material variety. It is, however, potentially problematic for the design of task-based courses.

Material classification is important for a number of reasons. First, it provides a basis for ensuring variety; syllabus designers can refer to the classification to ensure that they incorporate a range of material types into the course. Second, it can be used to identify the task types that match the specific needs or preferences of particular groups of learners. Third, it affords teachers a framework for experimenting with materials in their classrooms; they can systematically try out the different types of materials to discover which one work for their students.

### 2.3 Sequencing Materials

The design of a syllabus also requires that the content be sequenced so as to facilitate maximum learning. In effect this requires determining the complexity of individual material so that materials can be matched to learners' level of development.

The result of this stage is a list of materials organized by theme and specified in terms of the general activity that the learners will be required to undertake. The materials need to be sequenced. This might be best achieved by using detailed criteria as means of evaluating an intuitive assessment of material complexity. The criteria involve in input, conditions, processes, and outcomes.

The sequencing of materials should depend on complexity, difficulty and methodological procedures. Material complexity is the result of the attentional memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the material on the language learner. These differences in information processing demands, resulting from design characteristics,

are relatively fixed and invariant (Robinson, 2001). Material difficulty is dependent on the other hand accounts for factors relating to learners as individuals. It can influence how easy or difficult a particular material is for different participants. These factors include the learner's level of proficiency and also various factors such as the learner's intelligence, language aptitude, learning style, memory capacity, and motivation. The third set of factors involves the methodological procedures used to teach a material. These procedures can increase or ease the processing burden placed on the learner.

Sequencing materials faces several problems. Particularly the grading criteria to be used, since it's hard to find a sufficiently well-defined model of cognitive complexity to establish such criteria. However, although it's difficult to determine what linguistic content learners will learn at specific point in their development, it is much more feasible to determine what materials are suited to learners' developmental level given that materials allow learners to choose the linguistic resources they will use to arrive at an outcome. Materials do not need to be graded with the same level of precision as linguistic content.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, there is a vast amount of material to disseminate when considering syllabus design. The numerous approaches touched on here all offer valuable insights into creating a language program. The synthetic approaches of structuralism, functional-notional and task-based all have objectives to be attained, a content to be processed and learnt as well as drawback to argue. Thus a synthetic combination of the above approaches which is a multi-syllabus would be feasible.

The procedure of developing materials while designing a syllabus will go through three phases, involving classifying goals, selecting materials and sequencing materials, during which factors needs to be considered respectively.

Further points need meditating when critically reviewing a syllabus are the objectives of the course as well as the needs of the learners. To what extent has an integration of the various approaches taken place? Does the syllabus specification include all aspects? If yes, how is priority established? These questions must also form part of the criteria when designing or assessing syllabus.

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