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## Current trends on syllabus design in foreign language instruction

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### Abstract

The last decade has seen lots of changes in many fields of education. The field of syllabus design in foreign language instruction is no exception. The main purpose of this paper is thus to examine critically the recent approaches in syllabus design. First, three schools of syllabus design A) *Lancaster School*, B) *London School*, and C) *Toronto School* will be introduced. Then the following six types of syllabi which will be of particular relevance for foreign language education and syllabus design will be explained.

- a) structural syllabus
- b) notional/functional syllabus
- c) situational syllabus
- d) skill-based syllabus
- e) content-based syllabus
- f) task-based syllabus

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### 1. Introduction

First it would be appropriate to begin with terminological comments and clarify the definitions of the terms ‘**syllabus**’ and ‘**curriculum**’ since there are several conflicting views on what it is that distinguishes syllabus design from development (Nunan, 1993: 5). Regarding this difference, Nunan argues that it is possible to distinguish a broad and a narrow approach to syllabus design. According to Candlin (1984: 31) curriculum is concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose, experience, evaluation, and the role and relationships of teachers and learners. Syllabuses, on the other hand, are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation (narrower definition). Nunan (1993:8) also agrees with Candlin and proposes that:

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‘Curriculum’ is concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs. ‘Syllabus’, on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content (Nunan, 1993:8).

## 2. Current views on syllabus/curriculum

There are three important views in the scope of syllabus design. According to Stern (1984) the first trend is represented by Candlin and Breen, which is called ‘**Lancaster School**’. It is argued that:

This school of thought has strongly reacted against the notion of a fixed syllabus which can be planned, pre-ordained, and imposed on teachers and students. For this group, it is not a choice between structure and functional syllabus. The principle of any fixed inventory of language items, such as the Council of Europe syllabus, is unacceptable to them. They regard the syllabus as open and negotiable (Stern, 1984: 7).

They believe that the curriculum would be negotiated by the teacher and a group of learners.

The second direction represented by Widdowson and Brumfit, is called ‘**London School**’. According to this school of thought:

The Lancaster view is extreme and unrealistic. They are challenged by it; they react against it; they certainly do not accept it as their own. They put forward what they would consider an alternative and more realistic approach (Stern, 1984:8).

Widdowson believes that a syllabus is necessary; it is economical, and thus it is useful. Like Candlin and Breen, he also likes the idea of freedom for the teacher. Widdowson makes a distinction between syllabus and teaching methodology. He suggests that a syllabus should be structural; it is the methodology that can be communicative. Brumfit's position is similar to Widdowson's idea. Brumfit argues that a curriculum is public statement serving all kinds of practical purposes. His concern is not the question of freedom and constraint which has been so dominant in the Lancaster group. He believes that a syllabus must be based on concepts of language, language learning, and language use.

**Yalden's formulation** is a bridge between the London school viewpoints and is called the **Toronto School** which represented by Allen. Again like Brumfit, Yalden identifies the theoretical underpinnings of the syllabus content. Yalden proposes that the learner may have an input to make curriculum. But she is not preoccupied with the learner's role in syllabus development. For her, the syllabus is primarily a teacher's statement about objectives and content.

As mentioned earlier **Toronto School** which is represented by Allen is not concerned with question of the learner's role in syllabus development. He accepts the need for a syllabus as unquestioned. The main issue for him is a question of constructing a theoretically sound and practically useful curriculum.

## 3. Different types of approaches to foreign language syllabus design

The choice of a syllabus is a major decision in language teaching. Several distinct types of language teaching syllabi have been proposed, and these different types may be implemented in various teaching situations. Krahnke (1987: 10) has proposed six types of syllabi as follows:

- a) A **structural syllabus** is a kind of syllabus in which the content of language teaching is a collection of the forms and structures, usually grammatical elements such as verbs, nouns, past tense and so on.
- b) A **notional/functional syllabus** is the one in which the content of the language is a collection of the functions that are to be performed when language is used, or of the notions that language is used to express. For example, informing, agreeing, apologizing, requesting, promising and so on
- c) A **situational syllabus** is one in which the content of language teaching is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used For example. Seeing the dentist, asking directions in a new town, buying a book in a bookshop.

- d) A **skill-based syllabus** is one in which the content of the language teaching is a collection of specific abilities that may play a part in using language.
- e) A **content-based syllabus** 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. An example of content-based language teaching is a science class taught in the language the students need or want to learn.
- f) A **task-based syllabus** is one in which 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. Task-based approaches syllabi, which create a favourable condition and facilitate language development, is the main focus of this paper and are discussed in more detail as follows:

#### 4. Task based approaches to second language teaching and syllabus

Among the above types of syllabus design, recently, task-based approaches to second language teaching, which focus on the ability to perform a task or activity, and not on the explicit teaching of grammatical rules, have been the focus of concern among language researchers and syllabus designers (see Prabhu, 1987; Robinson, 1995, 2001; Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 2003). Historically, task-based approaches to language teaching started in the early seventies and developed throughout seventies (see Widdowson, 1987; Wilkins, 1974, 1976).

There are three kinds of proposals for task-based teaching syllabuses. 1. The procedural syllabus (Prabhu, 1987: 46); 2. The process syllabus (Breen, 1984: 76; Breen & Candlin, 1980: 90); 3. Task-based language teaching (Long & Crookes, 1992). While differing from one another in important ways, all three reject linguistic elements such as words, structures, notions, functions and situations as the unit of analysis and instead they adopt task as the unit of analysis. These approaches are claimed to create more favorable condition for the development of second language ability than does an approach that focuses on the explicit teaching and learning the rules of the language alone. Of course, research into the validity of this assumption is still in early stages (Robinson, 1995).

Task-based language teaching bases argument for an analytic, chiefly type B syllabus. Task in TBLT is considered central to all of instructional design process, from the identification of learner needs to the measurement of student achievement. A distinction is made between *target tasks*, which are tasks as they occur in everyday life, and *pedagogic tasks*, which are derived from the target task sequenced to form the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom (Long, 1989: 89).

Pedagogic tasks are graded and sequenced by the degree of difficulty (from simple to complex). Task complexity is not the reflection of traditional linguistic grading criteria; rather, it results from task factors themselves. These might include the number of steps involved, the number of solutions to the problem, the number of parties involved and the saliency of their distinguishing features, the location of task in displaced time and space, the amount and kind of language required, the number of sources competing for attention, and other linguistic, cognitive or social factors (Long & Crookes, 1992: 45, 1993: 12).

As an analytic approach it differs from the syntactic syllabus in the same way as the procedural and process syllabi, notably in the assumption that the learner learns best when using language to communicate about something. TBLT also differs from the two other analytic syllabi in several ways. It differs from the procedural syllabus in that it stresses the importance of carrying out a needs analysis prior to instruction. Identifying possible sources of task complexity indeed is a necessary prerequisite for making principled decisions concerning the grading and sequencing of tasks, upon which much of the value of the TBLT will rest. Grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks is indeed a major challenge for the task-based syllabus designers.

#### 5. Teachers as course developers and their roles in syllabus design

Finally the main question is: ‘what is the role of the classroom teacher in syllabus design?’ Nunan (1993) refers to Bell (1983) who claims that teachers are consumers of other people’s syllabuses and their role is to implement the plans of applied linguists, government agencies. While some teachers have a relatively free hand in designing their own syllabuses on which their teaching programs are based, most are, as Bell (1983) suggests, consumers of other

syllabus designers. In line with this, Nunan (1993:8) agrees with Bell and argues that few teachers are in the position of being able to design their own syllabuses. Again Nunan (1987) reports that some teachers believe that syllabus development should be carried out by people with specific expertise. But I believe that classroom teachers should be given appropriate training to be equipped with necessary skills and information to design their own syllabuses if they are to be successful teachers. Meanwhile they should regard the syllabus open and negotiable. Indeed the syllabus should be negotiated by teachers and their students on the basis of the learners' needs analysis (Brindley, 1984). In sum, I would suggest teachers to follow Stern (1984) who advises that:

The more we emphasize flexibility and negotiation of the curriculum the more important it is for us, as teachers, to have something to negotiate about, and, surely, as Brumfit, Widdowson, and Yalden have stressed, it is important for the teacher to define the parameters, to provide direction, and to have the resources at our disposal which make up ESL/EFL as learnable and worthwhile subject matter in general education (Stern, 1984:12).

## 6. Conclusion & Implications

The propose of this paper was to present the key and central issues and options available for syllabus design in order to provide English teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills and familiarize them with these information necessary for syllabus design.

This study has also investigated the different teaching approaches to teaching on L2 learner's performance. This study is of immediate relevance for task-based language teaching and learning, and in particular for the syllabus designers. It was argued that the task-based approach creates more favourable condition for the development of second language. Therefore, it can be concluded that task-based language teaching facilitates better learning and promotes learner's performance in oral skill.

Finally, it is hoped that the issues and views discussed in this paper provide important theoretical and practical rationale for syllabus designers and material developers in ESP, TESOL, and TOFEL and also provide pedagogic implications which may be of particular relevance to teaching ESP.

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