The Syllabus: An Opportunity for Reflection

Brien DATZMAN
Center for Language Studies, Nagasaki University

Abstract

This paper sets out to define the place of the syllabus within the curriculum. It begins by defining what a syllabus is and the purpose it serves. This is followed by an overview of some factors that need to be considered when creating a syllabus. Finally, various syllables designs are reviewed and analyzed in terms of their strengths and weaknesses.

1. Introduction

The syllabus occupies an interesting space in the curriculum. It is subject to both conceptual and administrative constraints from above and materials and classroom from below. From the top, linguistic, second language acquisition, second language learning, and educational theories and research inform administrative decisions, which in turn take into consideration institutional and societal factors, to provide a framework from which an instructor can begin to design a syllabus. From the bottom, materials, the classroom, class size, learner experience and expectations, teacher experience and expectations, and evaluation all place limitations on syllabus possibilities. It has to both conform to these constraints and allow room for negotiation within a course, balancing general principles and factors of practicality. The syllabus is analogous to the teacher, and represents an interesting space from which we can objectively or, at least in a less subjective manner, explore and reflect on our beliefs and practices in regards to second language teaching. This paper is a brief overview of what a syllabus is, the (possible) role it plays in the curriculum and classroom, and a look at some of the design choices that have been proposed throughout EFL and ESL literature.

Syllabus: Definition and Purpose

Over the last 40 years there have been numerous definitions of syllabus by a number of ELT theorists and practitioners. With some variance in wording and content, they all refer to the syllabus as a document that states what is to be learnt, in what order, and how it is to be assessed. Dubin and Olshtin (1992) provide a useful itemized list of questions that they believe a syllabus should attempt to answer:

- What are learners expected to know at the end of the course, in operational terms?
- What is to be taught or learned during the course?
- When is it to be taught, and at what rate of progress?
- How is it to be taught, including procedures, techniques, and materials?
- How is it to be evaluated?

Syllabus design requires answers to questions of objectives, content, sequencing, time, method, and evaluation.

Brumfit (1984) situates and summarizes the characteristics of a syllabus in a more detailed manner:

1. A syllabus is the specification of the work of a particular department in a school or college, organised in subsections defining the work of a particular group or class;
2. It is often linked to time, and will specify a starting point and ultimate goal;
3. It will specify some kind of sequence based on
    a. Sequencing intrinsic to a theory of language learning or to the structure of specified material relatable to language acquisition;
    b. Sequencing constrained by administrative needs, e.g. materials;
4. It is a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds and so is negotiable and adjustable;
5. It can only specify what is taught; it cannot organize what is learnt.
6. It is a public document and an expression of accountability.

Brumfit sees the syllabus as a context specific, theoretically based, temporally and materially constrained document designed to hold both teacher and class accountable. The syllabus is a translation of the theoretical into contextually constrained practical action. Importantly, he recognizes the syllabus as an idealized document of administrative convenience. For the learner, it cannot define what is learnt, and for the teacher, it cannot guarantee what is taught or how it is taught. It is negotiable and adjustable. The degree to which this is true may vary depending on the institution, the skill of the teacher, and the experience and proficiency of the learners involved, As a

public document, he notes the importance of the syllabus as a learning and reference material for other teachers, available to both scrutiny and improvement. It is a document that can provide a common frame of reference that allows for professional awareness and cooperation among teachers.

Hadley (1998) and Rabbini (2002) see the syllabus as a philosophical statement on the designer's beliefs and opinions on the nature of cognition, language, and learning. Often these are a reflection of the SLA research and popular methods of the time. One need only look at the evolution of syllabus designs, from structural to communicative to task-based or linear to cyclical for example. Hadley adds that the syllabus serves as a document of power, a political manifesto, to which the learner can receive benefits from cooperation or deal with the consequences of non-cooperation, such as denial of credit or limited opportunities, whether career or education related. From these views, it can be surmised that the syllabus is document of import and consequence.

However, this view may also be, like the syllabus itself, an idealized version of the role of the syllabus in many educational contexts. Sinclair and Renouf (1988) point out that it is often the case that the syllabus, out of convenience, is dictated by a textbook. It is a table of contents, based on other courses and textbooks, and it is subservient to the methodology of the textbook chosen. They argue that content should be considered separately from methodology, and that this dictates specification of content prior to choice of materials. Throughout the literature, many state that a syllabus, by definition, cannot dictate methodology, but only content.

Syllabus: Context and Objectives

The core of a syllabus is the selection and sequencing of content. However, before this can take place, the syllabus designer must first take into consideration the context and objectives of a course.

Widdowson (1984) places an emphasis on context when it comes to both syllabus design and method of instruction. He argues that it is preferable to use a plan that is most likely to be received locally. Educational policies concerning whether there is an emphasis on developing learners in line with future social roles or as individuals need to be taken into consideration. He refers to these respectively as, position oriented and person oriented contexts. In position oriented contexts the ideal is that of a behaviourally conformist leaner with an emphasis on testing, while person oriented contexts will have a focus on the development of autonomous learners who are

working towards self-realization. The responsibility of the syllabus designer, in Widdowson's opinion, is to adapt to these realities, and not the other way around. Studies by Grifee (1995) and Rabbini (2002) illustrate this point in a Japanese context. Both found mixed results in their experiments with syllabuses more traditionally used in western educational settings.

A common goal of most language courses is to increase the proficiency of the learner in terms of competence (grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic), performance (receptive and productive), and/or awareness (explicit and implicit) in the short-term and to set a foundation for learning in the long-term. Ullmann (1982) and Stern (1992) argue the best way to achieve this is with a multi-focus approach that extends the syllabus to incorporate wider educational goals. They advocate for multiple syllabuses within one course that provide for four components: the target language, (the target) culture, communicative activities and general language education. They see the four syllabuses as complementing each other and creating a condition in which the learning of the target language will become more efficient and more relevant to the learners' experience both in the present and the future. In syllabus design, planning not only involves consideration of the type of syllabus, but also of how many are needed.

Willis (2000) looks specifically at language program aims and categorizes them under three broad headings: leaning about a language, learning to produce a language, and learning to use a language. Learning about a language refers to learning of grammar and explaining how a language works. Learning to produce a language refers to the accurate production of the language, while learning to use a language refers to communicating in the language with a high tolerance for learner error. These aims correspond to the grammar-translation approach, the behaviourist approach, and the communicative approach respectively. He notes that while the aim of many TEFL syllabuses is to promote language use, the measure of success is often in the form of a public examination or performance and, thus, will represent an attempt to predict what will be learnt. This inevitably leads to a focus on language knowledge and production rather than language use. A learner may be competent, but perform poorly, and vice versa. The issue becomes one of methodology and evaluation, both subject to the local context and teacher preferences, but not necessarily one of syllabus design.

In considering the context and the learning objectives of a particular course, situating the syllabus in the larger scheme of things in terms of context, education, and the learning process is both necessary and worthwhile.

Types of Syllabuses

In presenting and discussing various syllabuses, it is important to acknowledge two points. First, Widdowson (1984) categorizes the syllabus as a stereotypic construct, one that provides only a point of reference for the work to be done in the classroom. It is a framework that helps facilitate, not determine, the learning process and should be regarded as such. Although this is true, it is difficult, if not impossible, and not productive to discuss various syllabuses without consideration of the implication they might have on methodology, and as such, the following summary will include a discussion of some of those implications. Second, Brumfit (1984) argues for a norm of eclecticism and tolerance of diversity when it comes to syllabuses. It is not a theoretical statement, and should not be treated as such. Although this writer's inherent bias towards one or more the following syllabuses may come through in the descriptions, it is hoped that syllabus choice and design be viewed from this perspective and not one of dogma. Like teaching methods, it is not one size fits all. It should also be noted that what follows is intended to be a brief synthesis of some of the descriptions and perspectives on different syllabuses, and that anyone wishing for a more detailed look at syllabus design will find a number of relevant texts in the reference section.

Syllabuses have been variously classified and defined under terms such as structural, functional, interactional, experiential, non-analytic, and content. These syllabuses have in turn been categorized as being either synthetic or analytical, process or product based, and, when used together, as eclectic, proportional or variable. White (1988) contends that all syllabuses can fall under one of two groupings, Type A or Type B, and this provides a convenient and useful point from which to explore the variety of syllabuses found in the literature.

Type A Syllabuses

Type A syllabuses are concerned with what is to be learnt, the subject and content. They have a linguistic or semantic/pragmatic focus and consist of a list of discrete items with an objective of mastering those items either inductively or deductively. The list is created by an authority, usually the teacher, and may consist of grammatical structures, communicative functions, situations, topics, or skills sequenced according to some criteria, such as complexity, need, or distance. Success or failure in a class with a Type A syllabus is often defined by the learners' ability to produce those items accurately on a public exam. Implicit in the Type A syllabus is the belief that from

accuracy comes fluency and that learning a language is a linear process.

Type A syllabuses have been built upon one another. Most grew from the structural syllabuses of the 1960's and 1970's. Structural syllabuses consist of a list of discrete grammatical or linguistic items, such as sentence pattern or tense, that are selected and graded based on coverage, complexity, learnability and teachability, grammatical distance, frequency, or combinability. They are most commonly based on complexity, and move from simple to more complex forms. From this linguistic base, contextual layers were added to future Type A syllabuses and included functions, notions, situations, topics, and skills. The list of possibilities for selection of content in each are innumerable. Items are, as in structural syllabuses, presented as list of discrete items. The difference lies in the sequencing. Though they may be organized from simple to complex, more often sequencing is based on needs, utility, interest, or generalizability. Willis (2000) points out that these syllabuses are actually disguised linguistic syllabuses. Each of them are realized by the language they require. Intended as a communicative syllabuses, there is no requirement that the methodology applied in the classroom be communicative. Likewise, there is no requirement that a structural syllabus not be realized with a communicative methodology. This is not to discount the value they add. They provide context for the learner, shift some of the focus away from form to meaning, and, potentially, add motivation. These syllabuses have been combined to complement each other, as found in eclectic, proportional, and variable syllabuses.

Type A Syllabuses: Advantages

Advantages to a Type A syllabus are mostly related to their convenience. They are clearly organized, appear logical, and are familiar. Syllabuses from other disciplines are often designed in a similar manner. They provide for a measure of accountability to both the teacher and student. They are a public document to which both can measure their progress. Objectives and assessment criteria are clear and allow both the teacher and learner to easily manage their instruction and learning. They present learners with language that is broken down into discrete items that appear manageable and that don't overwhelm them with the enormity of the task in front of them, that of learning a language.

Type A Syllabuses: Criticism

A major criticism that affects all Type A syllabuses is that they do not reflect SLA

research findings about the nature of the language learning processes. The listing of linear, discrete linguistic items or grammatical structures implies that they are to be learned in isolation and then synthesized into a whole language. This does not reflect SLA research findings (White, 1988; Long & Crookes, 1993). Research in SLA has conclusively proven that language acquisition is not a linear process. If the objective of the class is promoting a competence in language use, it is possible, and maybe probable, that a syllabus of this kind is setting a learner up for failure in the short-term or long-term. Assessment and objectives in Type A syllabuses encourage growth in knowledge of language and a focus on accurate production at the expense of meaningful communication. They promote "native like" mastery as an attainable and desirable goal when, in actuality, it is probably neither attainable nor desirable.

Type B Syllabuses

Type B syllabuses are concerned with how the language is learnt, stressing process over product. They are learning centred or learner centred, and may involve the learner in syllabus design, objectives, and assessment. They may or may not involve a pre-selection or arrangement of items. Activities place an emphasis on fluency and meaning, and implicit in the approach is that accuracy follows from this.

The most extreme version of a Type B syllabus might be Breen and Candlin's (1984) process syllabus. It is learner centred, learner led, and has an educational rather than linguistic basis. The syllabus is a joint plan created and negotiated between teachers and learners form the start of the course until the end. It is unique in its retrospective nature. It is more accurately seen as a record of what was done, than a plan of what will happen.

The procedural syllabus was established by Prabhu in the Bangalore Project (1987). It is learning centred as opposed to learner centred. Tasks are designed in advance by the teacher and are focused on themes that are relevant to the learner and the classroom. Selection of tasks are judged by whether or not half of the class will be able to complete half of the task successfully. The focus is on the successful completion of the task rather than the outcome. There is no attempt to focus on the language or to provide a rule of grammar or spelling.

The task based syllabus developed by Long and Crookes (1993), like the procedural syllabus, takes task as the unit of analysis, but with one notable difference. Unlike both the process and procedural syllabuses, it allows for a focus on form. They believe SLA research findings motivate a focus on form and propose the use of pedagogic

tasks and other methodological options to draw students' attention to aspects of the target language code as opposed to the use of a Type A syllabus. Learners are expected to learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in activities and tasks that are graded according to their difficulty. Factors such as task length, complexity, and the language required define the level of difficulty.

Type B Syllabuses: Advantages

The strongest argument for Type B syllabuses is that they reflect SLA research findings. Learners do not learn language in isolation, as itemized lists, or in a presupposed order (Long & Crooks 1993). Thus, they are respectful of the learners' inner syllabus. They attempt to define and create conditions where the learner must use the language for real purposes, not contrived or memorized dialogues. These conditions lead to a focus on meaning and fluency which allows learners to better prepare for those conditions under which they will have to deal with the language outside the classroom. This closer connection to use in real situations may lead to learners who are more intrinsically motivated.

Type B Syllabuses: Criticisms

Like Type A syllabuses, it is not hard to find arguments against Type B syllabuses. For all three syllabuses grading and sequencing is problematic, there is often a purposeful lack of a focus on form, and they may not be appropriate for all contexts (Nunan, 1988; Long & Crookes, 1993; Widdowson, 1984). The redefinition of roles involved for both teachers and students may be problematic in certain classrooms and cultures. There are also accountability problems and the danger of a syllabus that lacks in specific, concrete goals and objectives that could lead to a directionless learner (Nunan, 1988). This also may lead to a syllabus that is less useful as a reference material for other teachers.

Conclusion

The designer of a syllabus, in most cases, will take into consideration aspects of both Type A and Type B syllabuses, and should not feel limited to one or the other. The principles of selecting and grading content has been traced back to at least the 16th century (Mackey, 1965), and there is no reason to believe it has been perfected in the last 40 years. The highly individualized and context dependent nature of teaching and learning languages has taught us the benefits of a multi-focused approach when it

comes to both research and methods, so why not the syllabus too. With careful consideration and negotiation, a syllabus can hypothesize what language learners might be exposed to in a class, reflect how and what was actually presented, and provide an important document of reference for administrators, other teachers, and learners.

Education, especially in regards to language learning, is a complex and dynamic process that calls for continual reflection and consideration for both the learner and the teacher. Syllabus design provides an annual opportunity, before each course, for teachers to take a moment, reflect, and contemplate their beliefs and opinions on language and learning, their educational context, and the current research findings in SLA.

References

Allen, J.P.B. (1984). General-Purpose Language Teaching: A Variable Focus Approach. In Brumfit (1984a). 61-74.

Breen, M. (1984). Process Syllabuses for the Language Classroom. In Brumfit (1984a). 47-60..

Brumfi, C.J. (1984a). *General English Syllabus Design*. ELT Documents. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Brumfi, C.J. (1984b). Function and Structure of a State School Syllabus for Learners of Second or Foreign Languages with Heterogeneous Needs. In Brumfit (1984a). 75-82..

Candlin, C. (1984) Syllabus Design as a Critical Process. In Brumfit (1984a). 29-46..

Carter, R.A. and McCarthy, M.J. (1988). Vocabulary and Language Teaching. London: Longman.

Dublin, F. and Olshtain, E. (1992). *Course Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Griffee, D. (1995). Student generated goals and objectives in a learner-centered classroom. *The Language Teacher* 19 (2), pp. 14-17.

Hadley, G. (1998). Examining the underlying principles of EFL syllabus design. *Bulletin of Keiwa College*, 6, 211-228. Returning Full Circle: a Survey of EFL Syllabus Designs for the New Millennium. Relc Journal 29 (2), pp. 50-71.

Long, M. and Crookes, G. (1991). Three Approaches to Task Based Syllabus Design *Tesol Quarterly* 26: 27-55.

Long, M. and Crookes, G. (1993). Units of analysis for syllabus design – the case for

task. In G. Crookes and S.M. Gass (Eds.), *Tasks in a Pedagogic Context: Integrating Theory and Practice* (pp. 9-54) Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Mackey, W.F. (1965). Language Teacher Analysis. London: Longman.

Nunan, D. (1998). *Syllabus Design*. Oxford University Press.

Palmer, H.E. (1921). The Principles of Language Study. London: Harrap.

Prabhu, N.S. (1987). *Second Language Pedagogy: A Perspective*. New York. Oxford University Press.

Rabbini, R. (2002). An Introduction to Syllabus Design and Evaluation. *The Internet TESL Journal* VIII (5).

Sinclair, J.M. and Renouf. (1988) A Lexical Syllabus for Language Learning. In Carter and McCarthy (1988). 140-160.

Stern, H.H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Ullmann, R. (1982). A broadened curriculum framework for second languages. *English Language Teaching Journal* 36 (4).

White, R.V. (1998). *The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation, and Management*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Willis, D. (2000) *Syllabus and Materials*. The University of Birmingham Open Distance Learning Postgraduate Programmes. Birmingham: The Centre for English Language Studies.

Widdowson, H.G. (1984). Educational and Pedagogic Factors in Syllabus Design. In Brumfit (1984a). 23-28.

Wilkins, D.A. (1976). *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford University Press.

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