

An Introduction to Syllabus Design.

Dr. Shabana Thayniath

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate a few examples of syllabi that come under the heading "Communicative Approach" namely the Communicative Syllabus, Functional syllabus, and Communicative Materials and Communicative Task. The benefit of the approach as well as the pitfalls has been indicated. In addition, the resemblance and differences between the different syllabi became evident. Through this comparison, the characteristics of the different types of syllabi were pointed out, as well as the development of theory surrounding Communicative Language Teaching syllabi types. Syllabus is an important part of teaching methodology and it has undergone the changes through the processes of language curriculum development and syllabus design whenever a drawback was identified in a syllabus type, a new syllabus type has come into existence. This proves that a syllabus with the aim of communicative competence cannot be static, but should be active and incorporate effective strategies from other syllabus types.

Keywords: Syllabus, The Communicative Syllabus Communicative language teaching Task Based Material, Methodology

Introduction

The focus of syllabuses has shifted from structure to situations, functions and notions to topics and tasks. In fact, as Nunan (1988:52) suggests, with the development of the latter it is palpable that "the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology has become blurred".

Lot of changes have occurred in different aspects of language teaching and learning because of the emergence of new approaches and theories. This paper looks at the currents running

through syllabus design. Syllabus is an important part of teaching methodology and it has undergone the changes through the processes of language curriculum development and syllabus design. Based on learners' needs and course objectives essential to require, a variety of language syllabus types have been devised.

Finally, the implications and applications of applying the proportional syllabus will be discussed both for syllabus designers and language teachers. Therefore this paper is focused concerned on linguistic theory and theories of language learning and how they are applied to the classroom.

Syllabus: Definition

A number of definitions have been proposed for the term syllabus by different scholars. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 80) define syllabus at its simplest level "as a statement of what is to be learnt". Widdowson (1990, p. 127) interprets a syllabus as "the specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners . . . a syllabus specification, then, is concerned with both the selection and the ordering of what is to be taught". In Wilkins' (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. According to Breen (1984) a syllabus can also be seen as "a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning".

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 It reflects of language and linguistic performance.

This is a rather traditional interpretation of syllabus focusing as it does on outcomes rather than process. However, a syllabus can also be seen as a "summary of the content to which learners will be exposed" (Yalden.1987: 87). It is looked as an estimation of what will be taught and that it

cannot accurately predict what will be learnt. Next, we will talk about the different types of approaches available to course designers and the language assumptions they make.

Widdowson says that, “a syllabus not only defines what the ends of education through a particular subject ought to be, but it also provides a framework within which the actual process of learning must take place”.

According to Richards and Rodgers (1994:66), syllabi and teaching methods are based on the Communicative Approach aim to:

- a) Make communicative competence the goal of language teaching.
- b) Develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

Breen (1989:47) defines syllabus as “...a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning”. This shows that a syllabus is a plan of work drawn up for the purpose of teaching and learning a course. During different periods, different approaches to teaching have been used. Different syllabuses have been used for different approaches to language teaching. The syllabus depends on the approaches to teaching. Underlying each approach to language teaching is a theory of language and a theory learning which determine the syllabus and methodological procedures of the approach.

The last few years has seen a change from the teaching of grammar and usage to the teaching of real language use and the teaching of communication functions. The communicative syllabus looks at the needs of the learners. The student’s syllabus has a list of grammatical items, usually arranged in the order in which they are taught (Rod Ellis P.91).

The Communicative Syllabus

The communicative approach is usually based as a notional or functional syllabus which is not graded according to the grammatical structures, but according to the functions and notions of the language (Swan 1985).

The communicative syllabus is based on speech acts or language functions rather than on units as grammar; that is, the communicative syllabus contains units called “Ask, Request”, and “Demand” or “Generalize”, “Exemplify” and “Hypothesize” instead of “present simple tense”, “present continuous tense”, and “Relative Clauses”.

The following three types of syllabi based on the Communicative Approach will be discussed:

1. The Situational Syllabus
2. The Functional-Notional Syllabus
3. The Task-Based Syllabus

The Situational Syllabus

According to Wilkins the situational syllabus has constructed on the analysis of situations and behaviors. In a situational syllabus, the content is either real or imaginary situations where language occurs. This language is in dialogue form or in conversations. The learner has to practice the dialogues and memorize useful expressions. However, grammar and vocabulary also plays an important role. Main aim of the situational syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in different situations. An example of the situational syllabus is

1. At the hotel.
2. At the bank.
3. At the restaurant.
4. At the airport.

According to Yalden (1987:35), The situational model will comprise units indicating specific situations, such as 'At the Post Office', 'Buying an Airline Ticket', or 'The Job Interview'. The topical or thematic syllabus is similar, but generally employs the procedure of grouping modules or lessons around a topic, something like barnacles clinging to the hull of a ship. In situational approach, the use of dialogues is very common as this form the basis of communication within a specific situation. The situational dialogue approach is "aimed at meaningful conversational interchange in specific contexts" (Norris as quoted by Yalden, 1987:35). This means that the dialogues used in the situational syllabus, don't have language

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:1 January 2017

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structures as their main focus, but rather their communicative effectiveness within a given situation. Yalden (1987:3) describes examples of situational syllabi in which students are initially presented with a "problem situation" or "illustrative situation". This "problem situation" is then followed by drills and inventions and then by "practice situations". It is thus evident that the different situations created in Situational Syllabi determine the language structures to be learnt. The aim of the Situational Syllabus is to develop communicative competence, the nature of its contents will not lead to total communicative competence this drawback leads to the development of the Functional-Notional syllabus.

Functional-Notional Syllabus

The starting point for the functional notional syllabus is the communicative purpose and conceptual meaning of language, i.e., notions and functions as opposed to grammatical items and situational elements which remain but are relegated to a lesser role.

According to Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:91), functional notional methodology attends to meaning more than structure and form, contextualization is a basic premise, language learning is learning to communicate, reading and writing can start from the first day and communicative competence is the desired goal.

In a functional notional syllabus, the teaching activity in the classroom should be learner centered, and all course components are viewed as a systematic whole.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) give the merits of functional notional syllabus four perspectives - sociolinguistic perspective, psycholinguistic perspective and educational perspective educational principles.

In the sociolinguistic perspective, the functional-notional approach emphasizes the communicative purpose of the speech act.

In the psycholinguistic perspective, the functional-notional approach places the requirements of learners at the very center of the teaching program.

In the linguistic perspective, the functional-notional approach gives prominence to the dialectical requirements recognized by the foreign learners.

In the educational perspective, the functional-notional approaches make a serial of, essential components for any educational level.

Functional Syllabus

This syllabus gives the communicative functions that are to be taught to the learners like requesting, suggesting, promising, describing, warning, identifying, persuading, etc. The syllabus also lists the sentence patterns that are used to realize these functions.

Notional Syllabus

In the notional syllabus, the teaching points are notions of language. Notions are meaning elements that may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs. The use of notions depends on three major factors - the functions, the elements in the situations and the topic being discussed.

The advantages of Functional notional syllabus, as stated by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983:18-19) are

1. It sets realistic learning tasks in which full-class or individualized instruction can be utilized.
2. It provides for the teaching of everyday, real-world language use in a variety of sociocultural situations in which features of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and culture are selected and graded according to their priority in actual communication, and intermeshed meaningfully from the first lesson at the beginning level of learning to serve the learner's immediate communicative purpose
3. It leads us to emphasize the need for numerous, varied, receptive activities before rushing learners into premature performance.

4. It recognizes that while the language used in any speech act should be based on the situation or setting in which it occurs and be grammatically and semantically appropriate, the speaker must, above all, have a real purpose for speaking and something to talk about.

5. The act of communication, even at elementary levels, will be intrinsically motivating simply because it expresses basic, universal communicative functions of language and because it makes use of notions that are most appropriate to complete the specific function or functions being expressed.

6. It enables teachers to exploit sound psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, linguistic and educational principles.

7. It can develop naturally from existing teaching methodology. Curriculum writers and teachers may, thus, use an eclectic approach, taking what has been found best and most suited to their teaching personalities from the direct, audio-lingual, structural, situational, or any other method and integrate relevant features of each into a functional-notional approach

8. It does not insist upon mastery of any body of material when it is presented. A spiral, expandable curriculum is envisaged so that grammatical and topical or cultural materials can be studied in greater depth whenever relevant during the course.

Skill-based Syllabus

Skill-based syllabus, it used to learn a specific language skill. Skill-based syllabus deals with the sub-skills, sub-process and activities that are related to identifying a topic and brainstorming different ideas in the prewriting stage, drafting the text, etc. Thus, syllabus design is mainly concerned with selection and grading of the context. The main question in syllabus design is from where the context should come from. The learners should be exposed to carefully selected language and help them achieve their goals.

In the beginning, the task for the learners was to master grammatical, phonological and vocabulary items given by the syllabus designers. In 1970s, Communicative Language teaching brought a change in the focus of language teaching. The main question here is what does the learner need to do with the target language rather than ‘what are the linguistic elements the learners need to master’. It is of great importance to note that no single type of syllabus is appropriate for all

teaching settings. The needs and conditions of each setting have a different requirement making it difficult for integration.

In skill-based syllabus, the content of the language teaching involves a collection of particular skills that may play a role in using language. Relevance on student-felt needs or wants is the advantage of the skill based syllabus because learners who know what they need to do with the language generally show great acceptance of instruction that is clearly directed toward their goals

The primary purpose of skill based instruction is to teach the specific language that is useful in language. Skill-based syllabus merge linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse) together in spoken language for the main idea ,writing paragraphs, delivering effective lectures .

Four Modes of Understanding Language

There are four modes of understanding language.

- 1) Listening: like getting specific information, listening to radio, TV, etc.
- 2) Speaking: like giving instructions, asking for instructions.
- 3) Reading: like Skimming and scanning.
- 4) Writing: like specific topic sentences, reports letters etc.

The advantage of skill-based syllabus is it is possible to predict what learners require because learners know what they require and it can make test writing (and administration) a uniform and streamlined process.

Each given syllabus can be process oriented or product oriented with grammatical structures, functions, notions, topics, themes and situations. A process oriented syllabus is concerned with the cognitive activities involved in language learning. Some examples of process syllabuses include procedural syllabus, task-based syllabus and context syllabus. A product based syllabus makes statements on the expected outcomes of language teaching for a fixed period of

time. Some examples of product oriented syllabus are functional notional syllabuses and product oriented syllabuses.

Conclusion

There are number of approaches when considering syllabus design. The approaches discussed here offer valuable insights into generating a language program. The synthetic approaches of, situational, functional-notional and structuralism, all have objectives to be attained, a content to be processed and learnt.

A product based syllabus makes statements on the expected outcomes of language teaching for a fixed period of time whereas Communicative language teaching is the same language like traditional situational courses but in different packaging

At the end I would conclude with Stenhouse (1975) has called ‘provisional specifications’. It is up to teachers to make their own methodological decisions based on their understanding of what will work best with their own students.

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Dr. Shabana Thayniath

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Muffakham Jah College of Engineering & Technology
Hyderabad 500034
Telangana
India
shabana@mjcollege.ac.in