Theoretical Insights Inspiring the Conceptualization of the Language Curriculum: A Critical Overview

Muhammed Rukan Uddin, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Chittagong
Bangladesh
Phone: +8801924441878
rukan.uddin1980@gmail.com

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Abstract

The paper critically overviews theories of language which provide conceptual framework for developing language curriculums. First, the paper attempts to define language curriculum and syllabus, and discuss the three schools of curriculum marked by Stern (1984) which include Lancaster School, London School and Toronto School. Second, the paper focuses on the three educational value systems, such as classical humanism, reconstructivism and progressivism. These value systems have helped set the objectives of education and directed the procedures and purposes of education since classical times to the modern. Third, the paper comments on major curriculum types belonging to the two broader approaches—product and process. Finally, Finny's (2002) proposal for a mixed-focused curriculum (MFC) has been discussed which is followed by a brief note on Kumaravadivelu's (2006) insightful thought on the categorisation of teaching methods in correspondence with the established curriculum types—structural, notional-functional and procedural.

Keywords: Language curriculum development, educational value systems, product-oriented syllabuses, process-process syllabuses, syllabus design

1. **Introduction**

The curriculum is said to have started its academic journey from Plato's Academy. The Academy was based on liberating curriculum which imparted knowledge of dialectics to enable the learners to reach the highest truth. The curriculum, through numerous crossings, reached the Bangalore Project (1979-1984) of which Prabhu, an Indian educationist, was the principal architect. This long journey has witnessed, among others, three value systems: classical humanism, re-constructionism, progressivism; and two major breakthroughs in the 20th century: the Council of Europe's proposal for notional-functional syllabus (NFS), and the TESOL Convention at Toronto in 1983. Yalden (1984) in the Toronto convention stated that principles

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of syllabus largely depend on three major aspects: (a) how language is learnt; (b) how language is acquired; and (c) how language is used. This insightful statement gives us enough scope to reflect on theories of language learning, language acquisition and psychology which provided theoretical basis for the conceptualization of different syllabuses. Having conducted an extensive review of relevant literature, the paper attempts to define syllabus and curriculum; give a critical overview of the syllabus and curriculum from classical times to the modern; discuss theoretical underpinnings inspiring the conceptualizations of different syllabus types, and contemporary developments in the area of syllabus and curriculum studies.

2. **Defining Syllabus and Curriculum**

Syllabus, in its origin, is a British term. In North American countries, curriculum 'tends to be' synonymous with 'syllabuses' (White, 1988). In general, syllabus is meant to concern itself with the content and subject matter of teaching (Tickoo, 2003). But curriculum has a much wider concept. It involves objectives, planning, diffusion and evaluation of a particular educational programme. Furthermore, curriculum reflects a nation's education policy, goals and objectives.

Though definitions abound in literature, the one provided by Corder (1973), a British linguist, appears more inclusive:

> Syllabus is the overall plan for learning process. It too, must specify what components, or learning items, must be available, or learned by a certain time; what is the most efficient sequence in which they are learned; what items can be learned simultaneously; what items are available from stock, that is, already known and the whole process is determined by considerations of how long it takes to produce or learn, component or item. (p.296)

Breen (2001) makes a clear distinction between syllabus and curriculum. According to Breen (2001), the syllabus is a plan of what will be achieved in class through teaching and learning. It identifies what will be worked upon by the teacher and learner regarding selected content. On the other hand, curriculum is made up of four elements: aims, content, methodology, and evaluation. Curriculum, for Breen (2001), subsumes syllabus. Nunan (1988) speaks about two views of syllabus design: narrow and broad. The narrow view makes a clear distinction between syllabus and mathodology, and limits syllabus to the areas of selection and grading of content. Those adopting a broad view denies the distinction, and holds that after the advent of communicative language teaching such distinction dissolved.

3. **Emergence of Three Schools**

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Stern (1984) presented a critical review and an extensive discusson on the papers presented in the 'historical' TESOL convention-1983 in Canada. He marked out three schools— Lancaster School, London School and Toronto School—with three different views on curriculum and syllabus. First, the Lancaster School, represented by C. Candlin and M.P. Breen, agrees with principles of progressivism and Stenhouse's process syllabus based on negotiations between the teachers and leareners.They hold that language syllabus can never be pre-planned, and imposed on teachers and students. Second, the London School of which H.G.Widdowson and C.J. Brumfit are the main exponents considers syllabus as "a retrospective record rather than prospective plan" (Candlin,1984,p.35*)*. Last, the Toronto School represented by Allen (1984) discards the Lancaster School's view of 'negotiating' with learners as naïve, and reduces the learner role in syllabus design. He accepts the need for a syllabus without question, but he puts emphasis on constructing a curriculum which is theoretically justified and practically useful. Yalden (1984), on the other hand, synthesizes the Lancaster and Toronto Schools, and accepts Brumfit's view of social importance and necessity of the syllabus, and supports Candlin's advocacy for learner autonomy.

4. **Approaches to Language Syllabuses**

The language syllabus either belongs to the 'product approach' of Tyler (1949) or the 'process approach' of Stenhouse (1975). According to Nunan (1988), the product syllabus emphasises knowledge and skills which learners are expected to attain following instruction while the process syllabus focuses on the experience the learners have during learning. Tyler's product syllabus is based on 'ends-means', while Stenhouse's process syllabus is on 'negotiations'. Wilkin (1976) divides language syllabus into two types: synthetic and analytic. For Wilkin (1976), in a synthetic syllabus different parts of language are taught in piecemeal. He is of the opinion that "language acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure has been built up" (p.2). In contrast, an analytic syllabus emphasises learning a language through linguistic chunks which are more product-oriented. Therefore, the analytic syllabus is "organized in terms of the purposes for which people learn language and the kind of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes" (Wilkin, 1976, p.13). Furthermore, White (1988) brings all syllabuses to two broader types: Type-A to represent the product-based syllabus and Type- B to represent the process-based syllabus. Furthermore, Allen (1984) provides three approaches to language curriculum which he refers to as Type-A, Type-B and Type-C. Again, Breen (1984) puts all the syllabuses into two broader categories: 'propositional plans' and 'process plans'; the former includes formal and functional syllabuses while the latter refers to procedural and task-based or process-based syllabuses. All these typical syllabuses have further classifications.

5. **Curriculum and Three Educational Value Systems**

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Skilbeck (1982) developed three educational value systems—classical humanism, reconstructionism and progressivism—which immensely influenced educational philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy. Later, Clerk (1987) and White (1988) discussed and elaborated Skilbeck's thoughts in greater detail. According to Skilbeck (1982), classical humanism looks upon education as transmission and curriculum as content. Reconstructionism, on the other hand, considers education as instrumental and curriculum as product. Finally, progressivism regards education as development and curriculum as process. The purpose of classical humanism, as Littlewood (1992) observes, is "to transmit valued knowledge and culture to an elite section of the next generation, and, in so doing, to develop their general intellectual abilities" (p. 14). Main purpose of reconstructionism is to initiate desired social change while progressivism aims at achieving individualism or self-esteem. Prahlad (2010) gives a short but apt description of the three value systems with their principles and the kind of curriculum or syllabus they inspire. According to Prahlad (2010), "classical humanism underlies the grammar /system based curriculum; reconstructionism is at the heart of the function-based or communicative curriculum, and progressivism is reflected in the process-based curriculum" (p. 101). The following Table 3.4 shows the three value systems and their correspondence with foreign language curriculum:

Table 1
Three educational value systems and their implications for foreign language syllabus

Value systems	Foreign language syllabus/curriculum
Classical humanism	- The Grammar-translation approach. - Content to be taught and learnt is expressed in terms of the elements of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. - Learners need to understand the rules and apply them.
Reconstructivism	- Audio-lingual, audio-visual/situational, functional-notional approaches - Basic units of organization are semantic. - For beginners, the exponents are to be chosen on the basis of maximum usefulness and learnability.
Progressivism	- Process-based /procedural syllabus approach - Evidence shows that acquisition is not linear cumulative process, but it follows gradual development, in which many knowledge elements grow once at different rates and at different levels of perfection.

Adapted from Clark, 1987, p.93 and White, 1988, p.132.

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6. Major Language Syllabus Types and Underlying Theories

Teaching and learning practices, by and large, are theory-driven. According to Stern (1983, p. 23) theory "reveals itself in the assumptions underlying practice" which is manifested in the syllabus. A syllabus, therefore, represents a particular view of language and language learning. The study discusses major language syllabus types to make sense of how theories inspire language syllabuses, and also how the popularity of language syllabuses depends on the popularity of language theories. The following Table 3.1 summarises major language curriculum/syllabus types in the last 50 years and their pedagogical practices:

Table 2

Summary of curriculum changes in the last 50 years

Curriculum design	Theoretical perspective	Units of analysis	Students' main activities	Comments
Structural/ Grammar-translation	Structural linguistics; descriptions of parts of sentences; learning rules of language	Inventory of grammatical structure; lists of vocabulary items	Memorise words and rules; write exercises and translate sentences; study simplified written passages which illustrate grammar and vocabulary	Emphasis on language as form; focus on written language; Learners read and analyse original novels, plays, poetry
Audio-lingual Audio-visual	Behaviourism theory-learn through imitations	Pre-scripted, written dialogues recorded on tape with accompanying slide pictures	Listen to and repeat dialogues; imitation of set dialogues; practise variations	Repetition of artificial dialogues and invented contexts
Functional-notional curriculum	Speech theory	Functions: to agree to request to refuse. Negotiations: time, place	Practise speech acts in simulated activities	Language-centred; decontextualised speech acts
Communicative language	Learn language	Information exchange;	Language activities such as	Oral emphasis;

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teaching	through spoken interaction	includes elements from other models	information gap tasks	rehearsal for authentic language use out of class
Task-based curriculum	Negotiation of meaning through doing tasks	Tasks and grammar of tasks	Interactive tasks associated with subject learning (e.g., science experiments)	Language of *(Continued)* indeterminate
Content-based curriculum (bilingual and immersion programmes)	Learn language through study of subject content	Course content: experiments in science, topics in history	Tasks and texts associated with subject learning (e.g., science experiments)	Use of target language for authentic purposes
Genre-based curriculum	Texts as social semiotic products and processes	Text-types or genres-oral and written	Genre analysis and composition; written focus	Focus on lexicon-grammar of genre

Adapted from Mickan, 2012, p.84.

6.1 Formal/ Grammatical/Structural Syllabus

Formal syllabus thrived as an expression of the dominant paradigm of the immediate post-war II years. Though Tickoo (2003) traces the origin of formal syllabus back to mastery method (MM) of Thomas Prendergast (1806-1886), groundbreaking works of Lado (1957) and Fries (1945) on contrastive analysis (CA) greatly influenced the theoretical basis of the formal syllabus. The CA hypothesis claimed that similarity between the L1 and L2 facilitates learning and causes 'positive transfer' while dissimilarity encumbers learning and causes 'negative transfer'. This view which was in accord with the concurrent psychological theory of behaviourism expound that learning happens through habit formation. In this syllabus, a language item is introduced at a time and the learner is expected to master the item before s/he moves on to further items. McDonough's (1981) opinion on hierarchy of language items in formal syllabus is mentionable, "The transition from lesson to lesson is intended to enable material in one lesson to prepare the ground for the next; and conversely for material in the next to appear to grow out of the previous one" (p. 21).

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Major principles of grammatical syllabus are: (a) language learning process primarily is incremental, not integrative; (b) linguistic items for the syllabus are selected and graded according to grammatical notions of complexity and simplicity; and (c) priority is given to the organisation of the text, not the construction or negotiation of meaning.

Chomsky (1959) challenged the claim of the behaviourist view of learning and identified fault lines in the conceptualisation of the language acquisition that learning is the outcome of habit formation. For Chomsky, language learning is an innate ability and every mind is wired with the language acquisition device (LAD) which processes the language input, and all languages across the globe share some common properties. Subsequently, formal or grammatical syllabuses fell into disfavour as theories underlying them got weakened before emerging theories by Chomsky (1957, 1959),Corder (1967), Hymes (1971), Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974a, 1974b) .

6.2 Notional-Functional Syllabus (NFS)

The basis of the notional-functional syllabus (NFS), the precursor of communicative language teaching (CLT), is found in the error analysis (EA) by Corder (1967) and morpheme order studies (MOS) by Dulay and Burt (1973). Both the studies suggest that language teaching and learning do not necessarily follow any linear correspondence. On the other hand, different branches of applied linguistics, for instance, Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics, particularly Austin's (1969) 'Speech Acts' theory, influenced the NFS immensely. Research in these areas focus on the language codes and with how people deal with language in social groups in certain contexts. More importantly, research in pragmatics denies any one-to-one relationship between the formal and functional aspects of language. Nunan (1988) shows not only how a single form demands more than one function, but also how a given function yields more than one form. The following tables show inconsistencies between form and function of language:

Table 3
Inconsistencies between form and function

Form	Functions	Gloss
The cliffs are over there	Direction	That's the way to the scenic view.
	Warning	Be careful of the cliffs!
	Suggestion	How about a walk along the cliff top?

Table 4
Inconsistencies between function and form

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Function	Forms
Request	May I have a drink please?
	Thirsty weather, this.
	Looks like an interesting wine.
	I'm dying for a drink.
	Is that a bottle of Champagne?

Note. Table 2 shows how a single sentence performs different functions while Table 3 exemplifies how a particular language function can be performed through a number of language forms. Adopted from Nunan, 1988, p.31.

Tickoo (2003), however, assigns three principles to the NFS that items in the NFS are (a) meaning focused; (b) based on analysis of learner needs; and (c) divided into two categories: functions and notions; the former refers to the communicative purposes for which language is used, and the latter to the abstract meaning.

6.3 Emergence of Communicative Syllabus: Widdowson's Rebuttal

In the early 1980s, Breen (2001) writes, the NFS was found to have two limitations. First, teaching of repertoire of functions was considered as constricting the learner's potential to certain set communicative and occupational roles. Second, the NFS, like the formal syllabus, was regarded as 'synthetic' where learners were to gradually acquire the knowledge of language in discreet manner—be in forms or functions—largely through decontextualised form-focused activities. But, Widdowson (1978) gives equal emphasis on both aspects of language:

> We may say that the realization of language as 'use' involves two kinds of ability. One kind is the ability to select which form of sentence is appropriate for a particular linguistics context. The second is the ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular communicative situation. (p.6)

Widdowson does not agree with the notion of the communicative syllabus. His comment, "there is no such thing as a communicative syllabus" (1984, p.26) appears to Stern as "a rather surprising statement for someone who has written a seminal book called *Teaching English as Communication*" (1984, p.8). He clarifies that "It is perfectly possible to adopt a communicative methodology in the realization of a syllabus designed along structural lines" (Widdowson, 1990, p.130). Widdowson's stance is that teachers can teach English communicatively following a structural syllabus because it is methodology which needs to be communicative, not the syllabus per se.

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Moreover, Wedell and Malderez (2013) opine that communicative language teaching from its inception had a clear goal to achieve communicative competence in English but did not have any clear route to follow. Coulthard (1991) attempts to clarify the aim of CLT stating that "the aim is not to produce someone who is communicatively competent but rather someone who is a competent communicator, and there is an enormous difference" (p.103). In this statement, the author makes distinction between 'communicative competence' and 'competent communicator' which indicates a shift from the 'what' to be learnt ('communicative competence') to the 'who', the learner (as 'communicator') and CLT essentially aims at the latter. Therefore, if the aim of CLT is what Coulthard (1991) posits i.e., to enable learners to become competent communicators, the language syllabus needs to be designed to enable learners to develop on the basis of Canale's (1983) framework which comprises four types of competence: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. However, Dubin and Olshtain (1986) mention three views of language central to the communicative curriculum: (a) view of language from sociolinguistic perspectives; (b) view of language from cognitive perspective; and (c) view of language from humanistic perspectives.

6.4 Process Syllabus: Going Back to German Linguist Von Humboldt

Influenced by John Dewey's (1910) view that a curriculum inspires learners to experiment ways of knowing, to explore knowledge and to involve in dialogue. Candlin (1984) advocates for a process syllabus that basically provides two aspects: (a) a plan which teachers and learners require to make through 'negotiations' in class; (b) a bank of activities based on tasks. It holds the view that since learning experience is not static learner needs constantly change. Therefore, pre-determined objectives, pre-set activities and outcomes are impractical. For Candlin (1984), a syllabus is 'a retrospective record'. In short, Candlin's (1984) process syllabus addresses the question, "Who does what with whom, on what subject matter, with what resources, when, how and for what learning purposes?" (White, 1987, p. 98). At the heart of the process syllabus is the belief held by German Linguist, Von Humboldt that "one cannot really teach language but can only present the conditions under which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way" (as cited in Chomsky, 1965, p.51)

6.5 Task-based Procedural Syllabus: A Meaning-focused Approach

The origin of task-based syllabus is found in the first language theories and Krashen's (1981) influential view that language is best acquired through meaning-focused input. From this perspective, the goal of the syllabus designer and teacher have been to encourage interaction through suitable tasks and negotiations for meaning. This task-based procedural syllabus ccomprises specification of tasks for learners to be engaged in through focus on meaning. At the heart of the procedural approach is Prabhu's communicational teaching project (CTP) which

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continued for five years (1979-1984) in Banglore, India. The main hypothesis of Prabhu (1987) is that language structure is best acquired when the learner's attention is on meaning. Prabhu (1987) used three task types in the CTP: (a) information-gap activity; (b) reasoning-gap activity; and (c) opinion-gap activity.

6.5.1 Implementation: Negotiating with Kids or 'Asking Patients How They Will Get Well'
        The main problem with implementaion of the process-oriented syllabus lies in the very principle of 'negotiations'. When it comes to implement this type of syllabus at elementary levels , it becocmes humanly impossible to fall in any negotiations with those learners who even might not know what is good or bad for them. If learners are compared with patients, negotiating about the contents and methods of teaching with them is like asking patients how they can get well (Tickoo, 2003) . Thus, though goal oriented formal syllabuses can be suitable for the junior learners at the elementary levels, the process-based syllabus may be effecitve for the ESP learners where the learners can render significant contribution to the process of negotiations. Moreover, there are always some discrepacncies between the theory and practice which usually surface during implementation phases. Because syllabuses or curiculums are largely influenced by different vaiables like social norms, cultural taboos, religious ethos and political decisions.

7.   **Mixed-focus Curriculum: A Synthesis of the Opposites**
        Syllabus types discussed above are either product-based or process-based. Neither of the two—product and process syllabus—is perfect in itself, but perfection may exist in the synthesis of the both. Since both the 'goal-oriented' and 'means-orientated' syllabuses have their rigid features, they create difficulties in implementation phases. Widdowson (1987) expresses concern about this issue, "I think it is unlikely that any research at present or in the future will provide us with anything very definite to resolve these difficulties" (p. 85). In this connection, we can think of the mixed-focus curriculum (MFC) of Finney (2002) which is essentially learner-centered and an attempted "synthesis of the product oriented ends-means model and the process oriented approach" (Nunan, 1988, p.20). The advantage of MFC is summed up by Yalden (1987) when she states that "it would seem to allow the syllabus designer the most freedom to respond to changing or newly perceived needs in the learners, and at the same time provides a framework for the teacher who may not be able or willing to go fully communicative" (as cited in Finny, 2002, p. 76). Finny (2002) provides a framework for MFC:

Table 5
        Finny's framework for MFC

Structure / Function	Function/Skills	Task / Theme

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Greater emphasis on structure and functions	Targeting specific functions	Remedial structural work
Introduction of learning strategies and techniques	Application through task-based and problem solving activities	Task-based syllabus focus on learning processes and strategies to encourage creative language use
Elementary levels	Pre-intermediate levels	Intermediate and above

Note. The table above shows the mixed-focus curriculum (MFC) framework combining aspects of form-focused and meaning-focused language curriculums. Adopted from Finny ,2002, p.76

8. Kumaravadivelu's Categorisation of Methods

Kumaravadivelu's (2006) categorisation of language teaching methods into three groups implies further classification of language curriculums. The author categorises language teaching methods into (a) language-centred methods; (b) learner-centred methods; and (c) learning-centred methods. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), language-centred methods are principally concerned with linguistic forms which "provide learners to practice preselected, pre-sequenced linguistic structures through form- focused exercises in class" (p.90). On the other hand, learner-centred methods are mainly concerned with learner needs and situations. These methods "provide opportunities for learners to practice preselected, presequenced linguistic structures and communicative notions/functions through meaning-focused activities" (p. 91). Finally, learning-centred methods are principally concerned with the learner's cognitive processing of learning. These methods "provide opportunities for learners to participate in open-ended meaningful interaction through problem-solving tasks in class" (p.92). We can align the three categories with three broader language curriculum types. The following Table 3.4 shows this:

Table 6

Aligning Kumaravadivelu's categories of methods with language syllabuses

Categories of methods	*Types of syllabuses*
Language-centred methods syllabuses ⟶	Structural/grammatical
Learner-centred methods syllabuses ⟶	Functional-notional, CLT
Learning-centred methods ⟶	Procedural, task-based

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syllabuses	

The table shows perceived alignment between three dominant language syllabuses with Kumaravadivelu's categorization of established language teaching methods.

9. **Conclusion**

A language syllabus, as Yalden (1984) opines, is the manifestation of theories of language learning, language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and psychology. Thus, underlying every language syllabus are language theories which again stand for different dominant paradigms of the time. Though the pedagogic exercise of syllabus and curriculum dates back to Plato, it has travelled through many crossings to reach Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' (1979-1984) . This essay attempts to critically review the three educational value systems and two major breakthroughs in the curricular studies—the Council of Europe 1971 and the Toronto TESOL Convention 1983—which shows future possibilities in the field of syllabus and curriculum. The essay has also shed light on the major syllabuses and their theoretical bases with particular focus on mixed-focus curriculum of Finny (2002) and Kumaravadivelu's categorisation of methods (2006) with regard to three dominant syllabus types, such as the structural syllabus, functional-notional syllabus and task-based syllabus.

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