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**Experimenting with the Concept of ‘Negotiating Syllabus’
in the ELT Classrooms**

Melissa Helen, M. A., Ph. D., PGDTE

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Abstract

Most of the ELT is done as per the prescribed syllabus/curriculum. It is very rare for English Language Teachers to find themselves in a situation where a rubric is given instead of a prescribed textbook. But the developments in CLT have given rise to a radical syllabus known as ‘process’ or ‘negotiated syllabus’.

This paper is based on one such classroom where I found myself without a textbook or any suggested reading. While it posed challenges in terms of choosing suitable texts, it also gave me the liberty that I had always longed for - the liberty of designing my course, selecting the appropriate material, and designing tasks based upon the needs of my students. However, the paper also observes the dangers of such a syllabus.

The Rubric

In the language teaching profession, there is a danger that people may often overlook one of its essential characteristics namely, that language is in itself dynamic, infinite and ever-changing.

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Therefore the best language teachers are generally dynamic themselves, in terms of the way they develop, add-to the prescribed curriculum and experiment with their teaching methodology.

The focus of my paper is on how the rubric may be exploited effectively in the Indian Universities wherein the element of heterogeneity of the students is wide and varied in many aspects. In view of this situation, in some universities, instead of a syllabus, a rubric is given to the faculty.

Syllabus and the Types of Syllabus

Two important questions that need to be addressed at the outset are *what is a syllabus and the types of syllabus*. There are many challenges to a proper definition of the term *syllabus*. In its simplest form, a syllabus means a list of the topics, books, etc. that students should study in a particular class, school, college, university or a course. A look at the essential characteristics of a syllabus would help in a better understanding of the term syllabus. It is a document that contains not only a list of the topics but the items that are ordered/ graded. It has explicit objectives usually expressed in the introduction. A syllabus is also considered a public document and it indicates a time schedule, hours allotted to topics, suggested/ preferred methodology and recommended materials (Ur, 176-177).

Among the types of syllabus in the context of ELT some of the generally known and accepted ones include: structural (formal) syllabus, notional/functional syllabus, situational syllabus, skill-based syllabus, task-based syllabus and content-based-syllabus. An experienced English language teacher will also be aware that no syllabus is distinct and purely independent. In fact most syllabuses are a combination of two or three types of syllabi.

Shift in the Focus of Syllabus

Communicative language theory has wide ramifications in the area of syllabus design and content. Many radical changes have been incorporated into the theory and practice of language teaching. A radical kind of syllabus that has emerged as a logical outcome of CLT is the notion of 'negotiated syllabus'. It is also considered as 'process syllabus' (Clarke, 13).

The recent years has witnessed a shift in the focus of syllabuses- from structure to situations and from functions and notions to topics and tasks. There is a blurring of the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology (Nunan, 1988).

However, a language teaching syllabus generally involves the combination of both the subject matter (what to teach) as well as the linguistic matter (how to teach). It actually performs as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be accomplished. Syllabus, in fact, deals with linguistic theory and theories of language learning and how they are utilized in the classroom.

What is a Rubric?

As already stated at the beginning of my paper, some universities provide a rubric instead of a well-defined syllabus. Technically, in its strictest sense, a **rubric** is a scoring tool for subjective assessments. For example the sample on mechanics of correct sentence given below provides the teacher a basis of assessment.

Rubric: Edits for correct sentence structure, capitalization, punctuation rubric

4 - Excellent (N/A)	3 - Proficient (N/A)	2 - Acceptable (N/A)	1 -Limited (N/A)
4 - Excellent Consistently uses capitals correctly	3 - Proficient Usually uses capitals correctly	2 - Acceptable Sometimes uses capitals correctly	1 -Limited Rarely uses capitals correctly
4 - Excellent Consistently uses punctuation correctly	3 - Proficient Usually uses punctuation correctly	2 - Acceptable Sometimes uses punctuation correctly	1 -Limited Rarely uses punctuation correctly
4 - Excellent Consistently spells words correctly	3 - Proficient Usually spells words correctly	2 - Acceptable Sometimes spells words correctly	1 -Limited Rarely spells words correctly
4 - Excellent Consistently uses sentences of appropriate length	3 - Proficient Usually uses sentences of appropriate length	2 - Acceptable Sometimes uses sentences of appropriate length	1 -Limited Rarely uses sentences of appropriate length
4 - Excellent Consistently uses sentences which make sense	3 - Proficient Usually uses sentences which make sense	2 - Acceptable Sometimes uses sentences which make sense	1 -Limited Rarely uses sentences which make sense

Rubric – General Guidelines to Teachers

However, a rubric in the present context of my paper refers to a general set of guidelines that are given to the teachers at the beginning of a semester. In addition to the four basic LSRW skills of language, the guidelines also mention the general vocabulary, grammar and other components of Language that need to be either taught afresh or reinforced depending upon the proficiency of the

students who enroll for the course. In other words the guidelines are given with an aim to improve the language competency of the students.

For example, in the writing component, while some groups get inputs on essay writing and technical papers, some groups get inputs on the basics of writing- right from sentence construction to paragraph writing. Similarly, when it comes to speaking and presentation skills, while one group (from the Department of Science) was given substantial inputs on effective power point presentations/ seminar paper presentations, one group (from the Department of Humanities) was given more help and practice with general pronunciation with the explicit aim of helping them learn the pronunciation of a few words – sometimes which they heard for the first time, or help them recognize their mother tongue influence and subsequently avoid such errors.

Thus, the teacher is provided with neither a concrete syllabus nor a prescribed textbook but only a rubric/skeleton of a syllabus which includes the LSRW skills, vocabulary, grammar and other components of language.

Contents of Syllabus

A syllabus generally comes with compulsory texts with a number of exercises, supplementary texts and suggested reading texts, scheme of valuation etc. While teachers who are relatively new to the profession may become frustrated when they realize that they are not handed over a neat, step-by-step, packaged approach to what is involved in running and managing a language learning classroom, some who are fairly experienced language teachers may find the concept of rubric daunting.

In the Indian context where one generally deals with large numbers, more so at the college level, a syllabus helps the teachers to prepare a lesson- plan that helps in both the pedagogic and administrative purposes. Once the plan is ready, the teachers use the relevant books or materials as they need them. I assume that most of us come from this background which I do believe actually lays a good foundation (in general).

Substitution of Syllabus with a Rubric

The substitution of syllabus with a rubric will definitely have positive and negative ramifications. One of the negative factors of a rubric lies in the fact that a teacher who decides to use a particular text, material or exercise has the problem of supplying the students with sufficient copies. This facilitation of the copies will be time consuming, as well as cumbersome. It also requires careful planning in advance. Further, contrastingly, a textbook (prescribed in a given syllabus) will at any given time be more economical as well as handy than the material supplied in every class. Some Universities/Colleges which are in a financial crunch may not allow official copies which leads to further problems among students who are irresponsible.

Another major setback over the absence of syllabus and a resultant textbook is the preoccupation of the teacher in spending greater amount of time in constant planning, choosing texts, appropriating them as well as designing tasks. This is likely to affect the quality of time spent on assessing and evaluating the students.

However, the rubric will be effectively used by an experienced and enthusiastic teacher who will find his/her own methodology that will exploit the rubric. That will enable them to plan the curriculum and also design the material.

Managing Heterogeneity

For an English language teacher, the degree of heterogeneity at the school level is much more manageable and tolerable than at the college level. This is attributable to the fact that at the school level very few students change the medium of instruction. A number of students at the college level have studied either in a vernacular medium, or they have studied in the English medium at rural or even urban schools where there were exposed to substandard English both at the classroom level and also the society they were brought up. The element of heterogeneity present at the school level is much more tolerable than at the higher education level.

The heterogeneity of an ELT class at the higher education is due to the following factors. Many students opt for a change in their medium of instruction at college level students and students also migrate from their native/rural places to join a college in the urban areas. In addition to this the policy of reservation also helps many from the disadvantaged groups to join either in a good college or a University. Hence ELT at the college/ University level becomes more challenging and it calls for the greater resourcefulness of the teacher.

While students from a reasonably good exposure to English as well as those from the elite schools find the ELT curriculum at the college level unappealing, unchallenging and non-contributory to their existing language skills or even substandard to what they have already acquired, the disadvantaged group struggles to cope with the same. The gap between the English language skills of these two groups is quite huge and has implications in their overall AGP as well as their placements.

Usefulness of Rubric

It is a known fact that many students with a good rank in some competitive exams such as the EAMCET, where they score high marks in core subjects such as chemistry, mathematics, physics, etc., unfortunately fare badly in the University end-semester/annual exam in English. Some even fail in their English paper. It is also observed that many of them do not qualify for placements in good companies purely because of their inadequate language skills, which include soft skills etc.

In this scenario, at the University level, the rubric helps the teacher to negotiate with the students' needs and the desired levels of achievement in the target language. This negotiation to decide the components of the syllabus is possible at the level of the University alone for understandable reasons- namely the limited number of students unlike a plus two level, general or even affiliated colleges. Further a teacher at the university level has some advantages in terms of time as well as the resources at their disposal.

My Personal Experience – Rubric as a Negotiated Syllabus

Out of my personal experience I would like to give one example wherein I felt the rubric came in as an advantage in many ways. At the University of Hyderabad which offers courses in the five year integrated programs, a large number of students who belong to the School of Humanities are those from the regional medium of instruction. The students in all probability are likely to pursue their Master's program in English, Telugu, Hindi or Urdu or linguistics.

Barring the students for their Master's Program in English, all the others have studied in vernacular medium and they want to attain a certain level of communicative competence in the English language. Their exposure to the English language and their expectations were to a large extent common. But some of them who had the advantage of better exposure to English were required to sit in the class for their credits. This posed immense problems to the faculty who could not aim at any average level.

The extremely diverse target group made it inevitable to go by a rubric rather than a well-defined syllabus. The rubric is similar to the 'negotiated syllabus' in terms of its desirability and the advantages (Nunan, 155).

The Experiment

In this scenario, the rubric was of an immense breather. It helped me to diagnose the level, determine their needs and chose two or three levels of texts and tasks. To cite the classes spent on improving their speaking skills, in which one particular class was on the aspect of pronunciation, I had an immense satisfaction in using a particular handout –which was exploited in many ways for the divergent needs.

The handout was based on silent letters. It contained a list of English words in which some letters were silent. The first activity that I planned required all the students to repeat the words two or three times. The subsequent activities were of a variety of interest. The students with a greater advantage in English were asked to come up with more examples, write the meanings, to do phonetic transcription, use those words in their running compositions, suggest possible antonyms and synonyms etc.

The other students with less exposure to English were given more individual practice in the actual pronunciation of the words. While meanings of some words were supplied they were

encouraged to look up the dictionary for some. They were also given the task of framing sentences on at least some of those words. The practice in pronunciation was repeated for some of the students and they were also asked to transcribe the words in their respective mother tongue (where the faculty and peers could help them to a certain extent).

Though I did not plan on any of these topics and exercises at the beginning of the semester, as I interacted with the students and gauged their needs, I was able to plan something that would help all of them. In fact some of these activities were added as an afterthought in the classroom as the handout was being used. In this sense I may call this a ‘process’ syllabus.

Similarity to the Process Syllabus

The rubric is in many ways similar to the ‘process syllabus’ which is not pre-set and whose content is negotiated with the learners at the beginning of the course and also during the coursework (Ur, 179).

A negotiated syllabus which is eclectic will definitely have other difficulties in terms of accountability in doing justice to the students, their needs, as well as drawing up a standardized test that will be fair to all the students. As discussed already, there are a number of problems when teachers have to plan well in advance and get ready with the material and task sheets. Further, from the student point of view, the tangibility of a textbook is likely to have some positive psychological impact which would be missing in a rubric.

To Conclude

In conclusion it is to be noted that a rubric by its nature of being eclectic places a great deal of responsibility on the ‘individual teacher’s ability to choose appropriate procedures and materials’ (Elaine and Yule, 10). A ‘competent and creative teacher working with mature adults may generate a unique, exciting and satisfying teaching /learning experience’ but one must remember that in most contexts the disadvantages of a rubric /negotiated syllabus outweigh the advantages. At a time when eclecticism is at its height in every sphere, Nunan cautions one against the dangers of a ‘lack of continuity’ and the ‘lack of accountability’ (154) and the prevalence of an atmosphere of a *laissez faire* which might defeat the spirit of the rubric and the negotiated syllabus.

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Sample rubric: <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=K53863&sp=true&>
22/3/2011. 9.30hours.

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