

ESP Syllabus

Lecture One

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Introduction

A syllabus is an outline and summary of topics to be covered in an education or training course. It is descriptive. Both syllabus and curriculum are often fused, and usually given to learners during the first class session so that the objectives and the means of obtaining them are clear. This lecture will highlight the different approaches to syllabus design and its development over years. Also, how researchers have come to define syllabus according to their perspectives. For instance, learner-centered versus learning centered approach to syllabus design, structural, functional or communicative approach. Additionally, synthetic or analytic approach which is divided into product versus process-oriented syllabus.

1. Learning versus Learner- Centered Syllabus

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1995), three types of syllabus design are mainly approached. First is language-centered approach which is seen as an undemanding and common to English teachers. It starts its procedures by the learner, identifies the target situation, provides the suitable language and material used, and then evaluates the syllabus items. Being systematic and logic, a language-centered approach is not, however, devoid of a set of shortcomings. Learners are typically a means of identifying the target situation; they play no more roles during the process and subsequently learners are to perceive only a restricted area of language.

Further, a language-centered process is considered as an analytical procedure of the surface level. Competence is, by no means, taken into consideration during such procedures. For many ESP course designers, it is evident that this syllabus type is still powerful, though, an unacceptable model (Robinson, 1991, p.36)

A Learning- centered approach to course design, in contrast to previously mentioned types, primarily emphasized the being of the learner at every stage of the course design process. Actually, it looks beyond the competence that enables someone to perform, because what is the target is not the competence itself but how someone acquires that competence process (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.73). The involvement of the learner in each phase would suggest that 'a) the course design is a negotiated process; its components may affect as they may be affected by others. In addition to that, any distinctive nature of syllabus is warranted by the total influence of both learning and target situation and b) the course design is a

dynamic process in contrast to language-centered approach'. Needs and resources are not, however, static and fixed; they may, now, undergo a change. Such kind of course design is literally ready to respond to any eventuality of development.

From the foregoing mentioned approaches to syllabus design and how data about learners' needs can be interpreted in favour of designing a comprehensive ESP course, it is apparent that both language and skills-based courses make the course less dynamic and interactive, which is not often the case with a learning-based approach. The latter is regarded as an interwoven procedure, as it is, after all, based on recognition of the complexity of the learning process (Hutchinson & Waters, 1995, p.77).

Syllabuses vary in terms of the content and the details they contain. The reason is that different syllabuses are conceived and designed to suit different purposes. Like approaches to language teaching and learning, syllabus design is inevitably related to, and hence oriented by, philosophical, psychological and methodological constraints (Ennadji & Sadiqi, 1994, pp.135-136. Since there are approaches to teaching methods and curriculum design, there are three main approaches to syllabus design which yielded at least three types of syllabus.

1.1. Structural/Grammatical Syllabus

In the 1960's the structuralistic approach underlined ELT, so that language learning was totally led by the grammatical domain. The overall knowledge of language rules, structures and patterns became widely known as linguistic competence. Linguistic performance of learners is, thus, conceived as a level at which learners are capable of handling those formal structures and patterns of language. In a description of such a trend to syllabus design, Wilkins (1976, p.2) says: 'in planning the syllabus for such teaching, the global language has been broken down into an inventory of grammatical structures and into a limited list of lexical items'. He, of course, specifies that syllabus designers selected their inventory from these lists according to the following criteria:

- 1-Simplicity, regularity, frequency and contrastive difficulty for the grammar inventory, and;
- 2- Frequency, range, availability, familiarity and coverage for the lexical inventory.

1.2. Notional/ Functional Syllabus

In the 1970s, the criteria of the structural/ grammatical syllabus started to be questioned; there was a clarion call towards a shift from structure to meaning. Wilkins (1976) was the pioneer of such change to syllabus approaches. Function and notion are terms generally coined with Wilkins. According to him, a meaning-based syllabus 'takes the communicative facts of language into account from the beginning without losing sight of grammatical and situational factors. It is potentially superior to the grammatical syllabus because it will produce a communicative competence' (Wilkins 1976, p.19). He distinguished three types of meaning as: ideational, modal and functional meaning.

- Meaning that is expressed through grammatical systems in different languages: ideational, cognitive, or propositional meaning;

- Meaning that expresses the speaker's or the writer's attitude: modal meaning; and
- Meaning that is conveyed by the function of an utterance: functional meaning.

He identified also three components of meaning: semantic-grammatical (time, quantity, space), modal (degree of certainty, degree of commitment), and communicative functions (judgement and valuation, suasion, argument, rational enquiry). All these components are, in practice, considered by the notional syllabus whereas the functional syllabus would consider only the communicative functions alone. This is, indeed, one of the shortcomings of Wilkins' approach which he himself admitted and said 'if there is an approximate agreement among scholars on an inventory of semantico-grammatical and modal meaning categories, there is no such solution for the functional ones.'

1.3. Communicative Syllabus

The notional/functional syllabus was soon criticized by some British linguists by merely replacing a set of grammatical items by a list of notions and functions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Nunan (1989, p.12) points out that 'among other things, it has been accepted that language is more than simply a system of rules. Language is now generally seen as a dynamic resource for the creation of meaning'. In terms of learning, it is generally accepted that we need to distinguish between 'learning that' and 'knowing how'.

During the 1970s, communicative views of language teaching began to be incorporated into syllabus design. The central question for proponents of this new view was, 'what does the learner want/need to do with the target language?' rather than, 'what are the linguistic elements which the learner needs to master?' Nunan (1988, p.11). The term *communicative syllabus* is a familiar one to most language teachers. Typically, a communicative syllabus will set out a variety of communicative abilities that the learner should be able to demonstrate at the end of a prescribed course or period of learning (McCarthy & Carter, 2001, p.55).

Whereas notional/functional syllabuses put a focus on learners' needs and perspectives, the communicative syllabus has come to more elaborate emphasis. Munby (1978) was one of the leading figures who introduced the communicative approach to syllabus design. His book provides a model for specifying the syllabus content relevant to the differing needs of ESP learners. He claims that "a specific category of second language participant has specific communicative objectives which are achieved by controlling particular communicative behaviours." (Munby, 1978, p.29). Piepho, 1981 (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.162) discusses the following levels of objective in a communicative approach:

1. an integrative and content level (language as a means of expression)
2. a linguistic and instrumental level (language as a semiotic system and an object of learning)
3. an affective level of interpersonal relationships and conduct (language as a means of expressing values and judgments about oneself and others)
4. a level of individual learning needs (remedial learning based on error analysis)
5. a general educational level of extra-linguistic goals (language learning within the school curriculum).

ESP Syllabus

Lecture Two

2.1. Other Types of Syllabus

We can distinguish mainly, according to Nunan (1988), between two types of syllabus: product-oriented and process-oriented

2.1.1. Product oriented syllabus. A product oriented syllabus focuses on the skills and knowledge the learner has to get, in order to communicate in the language. In other words, the focus is on the product (Nagaraj, 2002, p.158). This kind of syllabus is much more interested in content selection and end-product which encapsulates the skills intended to be developed. Product oriented syllabus is widely opted by language-centered adherents. Generally held views agree upon the fact that grammatical syllabuses are product oriented syllabuses in nature. The outcomes of the said syllabus can be, broadly, defined into knowledge-oriented or skill-oriented types. When syllabus planners focus on the former type, they have to list elements and content that learners are expected to master at the end of the course (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986).

Consequently, the distinction between the above orientations of the product syllabus would be of utility as far as language teaching is concerned. While knowledge/ content syllabus is approached without particular analysis needs of learners, it is quite suitable for General English language teaching programmes. Nevertheless, skills orientation to syllabus planning is much more appropriate to teaching ESP.

2.1.2. Process oriented syllabus. In recent years, some applied linguists have shifted focus from the outcomes of instruction, i.e. knowledge and skills to be gained by the learner, to the process through which knowledge and skills might be gained (Nunan, 1988). Now, process syllabuses focus on the learning experiences themselves (Kudchedkar, 2002, p.159). Dubin and Olshtain (1986, p.46) ascribe the following points to process happening:

1. The organization of the language content which brings about certain activities.
2. The role that teachers and learners take during the learning process.
3. The types of activities and tasks in which learners.

At this stage, the notion of *what* learners are expected to know is no more an option, now the shift is towards *how* learners can be able to know what they are expected to know. The focus on the experiential 'process' aspect is presented thoroughly in Breen's ELT Curriculum cited in Nagaraj (2002, p.160). The framework consists of several levels and is summarized as follows:

- Level 1: decisions for classroom language learning: it encompasses participation, procedure and subject-matter; who does what, with whom, on what content, with what resources, when, how and why?

- Level 2 : alternative procedures: are chosen from and agreed upon as a basis for working contract of the classroom
- Level 3: alternative activities: are selected from, on the basis of appropriateness to decisions at level 1
- Level 4: alternative tasks: are selected and undertaken within activities.

At the final level, activities, tasks and procedures are evaluated in accordance to decision made initially.

2.1.3. Content – based syllabus. Using content from other disciplines in language courses is not a new idea. For years, specialized language courses have included content relevant to a particular profession or academic discipline. So, for example, the content of a language course for airline pilots is different from one for computer scientists (Freeman, 2000, p.137).

For this reason, the question of what content to teach to different learners group led to devising a syllabus that incorporates the intended content. The terms content-based instruction (CBI) and content-based syllabus were initially used interchangeably. Content- based syllabus is the one organized around themes, topics and other units of content. Content, rather than grammar, functions or situations is the starting point in the syllabus (Richards, 2001).

Eskey 1997 (as cited in Master, 2000, p.93) labels CBI a syllabus and says:

"The content-based syllabus is best viewed as a still newer attempt to extend and develop our conception of what a syllabus for a second-language course should comprise, including a concern with language form and language function, as well as a crucial third dimension-- the factual and conceptual content of such courses"

2.4. Task-Based Syllabus

Task based syllabus came to light as a shift from emphasis on product to process; now learning is viewed as a process which grows out of the interaction of learners inside of the classroom about prospective real life situations. With task based syllabus, the real world is imported to the classroom. It seems necessary, first, to define the term 'task' and examine its implications in the design of courses and the implementation of courses with learning materials and activities.

2.4.1. Task. One would first embark on highlighting what task exactly means in language teaching/learning before launching to how syllabuses are designed according to tasks selections. In a broader view, Long 1985 (as cited in Nunan, 1988, p.45) provides a definition of tasks – far from language teaching- that entail language and those which are carried out without using language. He contends that a task is: "...a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation...in other words, by "task" is meant hundred and one things people do everyday life."

More narrowly, one of the workable and comprehensive definitions of task is provided by Richards, Platt and Platt (1992, p.373) as they put forward that a task in teaching is an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal.

2.5.2. Task –based instruction. Task-based syllabus comprises a list of tasks (for example, giving instructions or following directions) that the students will perform. It is argued that tasks provide a purpose

for using language meaningfully and that through struggling to use language to complete the task, the students acquire language (Basturkmen, 2006, p.24)

Prahu 1987 (as cited in White, 1988, p.104) explains:

“Task-based teaching operates with the concept that, while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning content, a subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstracts or acquires (or recreates, as a cognitive structure) some of the linguistic structuring embodied in those entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules.”

The performance of meaningful tasks takes place through interaction and meaning negotiation. Ellis (2003, p.3) made a distinction between tasks and exercises. While the former are related to pragmatic meaning, the latter are concerned with semantic meaning. He adds that exercise is 'form-focused' whereas a task is 'meaning focused'.

Hence such kind of task was labelled by Nunan (1989) a communicative task. He clarifies that during such task learners are comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. As a whole process of understanding, using and producing information, this seems to be processing the information contained in the data by using a number of strategies. ‘Focus on meaning’ and ‘completeness’ are aspects which Nunan’s (1989) definition shares with Skehan’s 1996 (as cited in Mishan, 2005, p.68) ‘... an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.’

2.6. Analytic and Synthetic Syllabus

Wilkins (1976) described two basic kinds of syllabus: synthetic and analytic, and claimed that all syllabi lay somewhere between these two poles. Initially people tended to equate synthetic approaches with grammatical syllabuses. However, some applied linguists feel that the term ‘synthetic’ need not necessarily be restricted to grammatical syllabuses, but may be applied to any syllabus in which the content is product-oriented (Nunan, 1988, p.28). Wilkins (1976, p.2) contends that in the synthetic syllabus: "The learner's task is to re-synthesize the language that has been broken down into a large number of small pieces".

The analytic syllabuses, in which learners are exposed to language which has not been linguistically graded, are more likely to result from the use of experiential rather than linguistic content as the starting point for syllabus design. Such content might be defined in terms of situations, topics, themes (Nunan, 1988, p.38)

Here, we may conclude that a syllabus addresses the question of what to teach, whereas method answers the enquiry of in which way or how to teach what have been already selected. Nunan (1988, p.52) realizes the fact that with the development of process, task-based and content syllabuses, the distinction between syllabus design (specifying the *what*) and methodology (specifying the *how*) has become blurred.

2.7. ESP Syllabus Components

Graves (1996) has put forward a framework of components which is useful for several reasons:

- a) It provides an organized way of conceiving of a complex process
- b) It sets forth domains of inquiry for the teacher.
- c) It provides a set of terms currently used in talking about course development

Table 2.1.

Syllabus Components

Needs Assessment	<i>What are my students' needs? How can I assess them so that I can address them?</i>
Determining Goals and Objectives	<i>What are the purposes and intended outcomes of the course? What will my students need to do or learn to achieve these goals?</i>
Conceptualizing Context	<i>What will be the backbone of what I teach? What will I include in my syllabus</i>
Selecting and Developing Materials and Activities	<i>How and with what will I teach the course? What is my role? What are my students' roles?</i>
Evaluation	<i>How will I assess what students have learned? How will I assess the effectiveness of the course?</i>
Consideration of Resources and Constraints	<i>What are the givens of my situation?</i>

Conclusion

An ESP syllabus usually contains specific information about the course; it is very well detailed and suitable to the learners' needs and objectives. To attain the latter, syllabus might be designed according to various approaches that have to meet the learners' expectations. It can be learner or learning centered, grammatical, discourse-based or communicative. In some other cases, it can be process or product oriented, content and task based approach. Finally synthetic and analytic syllabus will conclude the lecture. The previously mentioned approaches are intertwined; they just differ in the appellation and the perspective they are tackled from.