



A Quick Understanding of ELT Syllabus

Sanjay Kumar Jha

Director and Professor (Amity School of Liberal Arts)

Amity University Gurgaon, Haryana, India

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Abstract

The paper has threefold concern. Firstly, it is retrospective in that it assesses the designs of ELT syllabi of yesteryears; secondly, it is introspective in that it makes us ponder over the current practice of designing ELT syllabi. Thirdly, it is predictive in that it predicts what the future holds in terms of innovating new approaches to designing ELT syllabi. This study is an attempt to give a quick understanding of the commonly used ELT syllabi to the prospective ELT practitioners who are at loss about executing appropriate syllabus for their EFL/ESL set up. Among the commonly used ELT syllabi, the study makes content analysis of *structural, lexical, grammatical-lexical, situational, notional/functional, mixed, process, cultural, skill-based, procedural, learner-led, proportional, content-based, and multidimensional* syllabus.

Keywords: ELT (English Language Teaching), Ideal ELT Program, ELT Curricula

1. Introduction

Since, we lack an overarching syllabus to meet holistic learning needs of adult learners in an ESL classroom; we firstly confront an issue of defining and designing ESL syllabus which conforms to the chicken-egg analogy. It is hard to say whether definition should precede the process of design or design should precede the process of definition. To my mind, first we need to understand the architecture of an ideal ELT syllabus. Normally, definition predicts the architecture but the field of ELT is so challenging, intriguing, and complex that we cannot encompass various learners' needs in the form of a definition. Definition is like a pre-indicator which is used to show the functioning of a phenomenon. Hence, it is imperative to understand first the functioning of a phenomenon rather than predicting the functioning of a phenomenon by definition. ELT is most commonly seen as an educational practice, with internal debates

focusing, for example, on the method, syllabus, content, and materials of teaching. In this paper, I aim to discuss the difficulties inherent in both defining and designing ‘traditional’ syllabuses (those designed by ‘experts’). I shall then turn to the ideas of Freire (1970), a non-ELT practitioner, and investigate whether and how his ideas can be incorporated into ELT syllabus development.

Numerous changes have taken place in syllabus designing partly due to varied learning needs of learners and partly due to emergence of different ELT methods, approaches, and techniques through time. The years of passive learning indicate that most *15 to 25 year olds in foreign countries all over the world* remain at the false beginner/elementary level in communicative terms (Hadley, 1998). They make surprisingly good command over declarative knowledge of the language but when it comes to procedural knowledge they start fumbling especially in academic writing and oral presentation. Similarly, Rogers (1982:144) quips, although “a lot of English is taught, not enough is learned”.

Despite loads of research on syllabus design, there is a substantial knowledge gap in terms of identifying and meeting the learning needs of adult learners of speech emergence phase. Psycholinguistically, there are two major concerns associated with adult language learners. The first assumes that adult learners are cognitively less prepared to learn an L2 in comparison with young learners. The critical period hypothesis of Krashen (1975) believes that our brain becomes fully developed by puberty. And if one fails to learn a language by puberty, s/he will find language acquisition extremely difficult. Secondly, speech emergence phase proves to be a high time for the adult learners because of their decreasing memory and motor skills. Krashen’s notion of giving one level higher comprehensible input (i+1) applies well with the young learners but adult learners are found to be less responsive to the i+1. Consequently, this study gives a concentrated focus only on one impediment, i.e. *sloppy syllabus* as it was found to be one of the most vulnerable impediments for the ultimate attainment.

Pertinently, the study sets the objective of *assessing the efficacy of ELT syllabi* for the ELT practitioners who are unaware of proper execution of ELT syllabi to enhance the degree of teacher’s teachability and learner’s learnability. Overall, this study is significant for the reason that it gives a compact account of pedagogical implications of ELT syllabi for the prospective ELT practitioners who are going to undertake the task of ELT in non-native environment.

Pedagogical Implications of ELT Syllabi

In response to the first research question, this section reviews four related aspects of pedagogical implications of ELT syllabi. They are *definitional implication, methodological implications, dichotomous categories of the syllabi*, and *Types and Contents of ELT syllabi* as follows.

Definitional Implications of ELT Syllabi

Viewing the ongoing changes in ELT theories, defining an ELT syllabus becomes equivocal for the curriculum theorists. There seem to be as many definitions as definers, each apparently covering similar ground, whilst containing various nuances and differences in emphasis (Hall, 1997). However, to

ascertain a working definition of an ELT syllabus, it is desirable to see ten influential definitions in chronological order.

- 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 (Wilkins 1981).
- Syllabuses are social constructions, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners (Candlin, 1984).
- The function of a syllabus is to specify what is to be taught and in what order (Prabhu, 1984).
- A syllabus is the selection and grading of linguistic teaching objectives (Pienemann, 1985).
- A syllabus is a statement of what is to be learnt (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).
- A syllabus is a summary of the content to which learners will be exposed (Yalden, 1987).
- Syllabus is seen as being concerned essentially with the selection and grading of content (Nunan, 1988).
- A syllabus is a document which ideally describes the following (Dubin & Olshtin, 1992):
 - *What learners are expected to know at the end of the course, in operational terms?*
 - *What is to be taught or learned during the course? (in the form of inventory items)*
 - *When it is to be taught, and at what rate of progress? (relating the inventory of items to the different levels and stages as well as to the time constraints of the course)*
 - *How it is to be taught, suggesting procedures, techniques, and materials?*
 - *How it is to be evaluated, suggesting testing and evaluating mechanism?*
- Syllabus outlines the goals and objectives of a course, prerequisites, the grading/evaluation scheme, and a bibliography (Kearsley & Lynch, 1996).
- A syllabus is an expression of opinion on the nature of language and learning that acts as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be attained (Rabbini, 2002).

It is remarkable that none of the definitions except that of Dubin and Olshtin (1992) gives a wider spectrum of an ideal ELT syllabus to meet different learning needs of different levels of learners. Therefore, the definition of Dubin and Olshtin can be deemed as a working definition temporarily. Since different ELT syllabi affects learning differently, this study treats syllabus as an independent variable and learning as a dependent variable as it is controlled by the former.

Methodological Implications of Syllabus

Methodological implication refers to the fact that each syllabus finds its theoretical base in some ELT methods. For instance, structural syllabus finds its theoretical base in grammar translation method; situational syllabus in direct method; functional-notional syllabus in communicative approach, and so on. So, methodological implications will be one of criteria of assessing the efficacy of ELT syllabi to see whether pedagogical practices of the syllabi are in line with theoretical underpinnings of ELT methods or not.

Dichotomous Categories of ELT syllabi

The following are the brief accounts of four major dichotomous categories of ELT syllabi.

1. Product vs. Process

This is the most popular dichotomy which defines product-based syllabi as those in which the focus is on the knowledge and skills that learners should gain as a result of instruction; whereas, process-based syllabi are those which focus on the learning. Above all, an ELT syllabus needs to be a blend of process and product as Nunan (1988) emphasizes that 'any curriculum which fails to give due consideration to both product and process will be defective.'

2. Synthetic vs. Analytic

Synthetic syllabi teach different parts of language separately and sequentially so that language acquisition becomes a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up; whereas, analytic syllabi are organised in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language. Structural, lexical, notional, and functional are all synthetic but procedural, process, and task syllabi are examples of analytic syllabus.

3. *Type A vs. Type B*

Type A and Type B dichotomy was propounded by White (1988). The former gives priority to the pre-specification of linguistic content or skill objectives; whereas, the latter aims to immerse the learners in real-life communication without any pre-selection of items (Allen 1984: 65). Type A prescribes lists of items to be learnt; whereas, Type B syllabi are more learner or learning centered by having their psychological and pedagogical bases rather than linguistic basis.

4. *Linear vs. Cyclical*

The linear syllabus attempts to add new blocks of information to create a greater whole to see more learning in the learners. According to Skehan (1996), language acquisition is much more of an organic, natural process that would benefit from a cyclical or recycling syllabus. But the irony is none of the syllabi and lessons are designed cyclically.

Types and Contents of ELT Syllabi

The following are the brief accounts of 12 major types of ELT syllabi with their vital contents.

1. *Structural*

Structural syllabus, (aka grammatical or formal syllabus), hypothesizes that language teaching is a collection of form and structures. The contents of this syllabus are mainly grammatical items such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, present tense, comparison of adjectives, subordinate clauses, relative clauses, etc. These items are selected and organized on the continuums of simplicity to complexity and expects the learner to internalize and master the grammatical items step by step.

2. *Lexical*

Lexical syllabus hypothesizes that lexis (vocabulary) as a starting point enables us to identify the commonest meanings and patterns in English, and offers students a picture which is typical of the way English is used (Willis, 1990). It uses the commonest words and phrases based on their frequency of use, collocations, etc.

3. *Situational*

Situational syllabus hypothesizes that language is related to situations of real life. Therefore, the contents of this syllabus are different kinds of real life situations such as seeing the dentist, going to the cinema, meeting a new student, and so forth. The learners are expected to actively participate and perform different roles in the given situations to learn the language in a natural and faster way.

4. *Notional-Functional*

This syllabus hypothesizes that the starting point for a syllabus is the communicative purpose and conceptual meaning of language, i.e. notions and functions.. The contents of this syllabus are communicative functions like *informing, inviting, agreeing, apologizing, requesting, identifying, denying, promising*, etc. along with different notions like *size, age, color, comparison, time*, etc.

5. *Mixed*

Mixed syllabus integrates different types of syllabi into one to cover different aspects of language learning. It contains specification of topics, tasks, functions, notions, grammar and vocabulary. It involves

lessons of varying orientation, e.g. some including important functions, others dealing with situations and topics, and yet others with notions and structures (Ur, 1999).

6. Process

This is the only syllabus which is not pre-set. The content of the course is negotiated with the learners and designed at the beginning of the course and during it in an on-going way (Ur, 1999). In the progression of teaching and learning, learners play active role in designing the syllabus; but eventually teachers take the control of the design.

7. Cultural

Cultural syllabus hypothesizes that learning habits across the world are not similar. Every culture has a particular way of teaching a language. One taught in India will find it difficult to comprehend the knowledge produced in Hungary. Stern (1992) sets six aims of cultural syllabus: a research-minded outlook, the learner's own country, knowledge about the target culture, affective goals, awareness of inter-culture, and emphasis on understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use.

8. Skill-based

Skill-based syllabus integrates different systemic units like pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse to give learners command over specific language skill(s) like listening to the main idea, writing well-formed paragraphs, delivering effective lectures, and so forth.

9. Procedural

Procedural syllabus (aka *Task-Based syllabus*) hypothesizes that we learn a language by using it to cope with real-life situations. It plans a sequence of tasks to develop ideas and communication of meaning. The contents of this syllabus are tasks about the real world language needs of the learner like *applying for a job, getting housing information over the telephone, map-reading, doing scientific experiments*, different types of information, and opinion-gap activities.

10. Learner-led Syllabus

Learner-led syllabus takes into account differing learning styles and aims to make the learner independent. The emphasis is on the learners, who are involved in designing their own syllabus as far as that is practically possible. It contains parts of learning a language and connects them to writing, reading, listening, and speaking to nurture essential skills.

11. Proportional

Passing through three phases namely structural phase (linguistic form), communicative phase (formal, functional, and discourse component), and finally, the specialized phase, a proportional syllabus teaches a language in proportion to develop an overall competence (Yalden, 1987:124). It consists of a number of elements with theme playing a linking role through the units.

12. Content-based syllabus

This syllabus ensures the learners are simultaneously the students of English and other subject too. For instance, a lecture of biology in English not only ensures proficiency in biology but also the proficiency in English as both the medium of instruction and the contents are in English.

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To be Continued...