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SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR LANGUAGE CURRICULUM: DISCUSSION OF KEY THEORETICAL INPUTS

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Abstract

Syllabus is a vital tool for teaching and setting the expectations of teachers as well as learners. It provides guidelines to the stakeholders regarding the teaching-learning process. Hence, it is imperative that the syllabus must be designed carefully. Designing a syllabus for a language course requires a thorough understanding of the requirements of the learners and the impact of the outcome of the course. Various theorists have defined different types of syllabuses which can be used in a language classroom. Those different types are defined on the basis of what the syllabus focus is. Few syllabuses focus on the content to be taught and some others rely on the skills that are required to be mastered. Language syllabuses are also differentiated on the basis of the approach they require to adopt for teaching. This paper aims to discuss different types of language syllabuses. The discussion provides details of the contents of these different types of syllabuses, their role in learning the language, the role of a teacher in designing a syllabus etc. In this light it provides a theoretical overview of the syllabus design for a language curriculum.

Keywords: Syllabus, curriculum, language learning, content, structure

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the syllabus is a vital tool for teaching and setting the expectations of teachers as well as learners. It refers to a specific plan of study. It is a statement of the structure and operation of a class. J. C. Richards (2001) states that syllabus design is the starting point of curriculum development. Breen (1984) calls a syllabus basic reference document that controls the teachers and the learners in the period of a course. Syllabus is the pre-selected contents of course instruction which is to be taught in a specific sequence (Richards &

Schmidt, 2010). Wilkins (1981) defines syllabus as the specified contents of language teaching which is structured and ordered properly to make the teaching learning process more effective. The syllabus offers answers to questions like what the learners need to know and what they should be able to do with the knowledge (Breen, 1987). According to Richards and Rogers (2001), syllabus refers to "the form in which linguistic content is specified in a course method" (p.25). Nunan (1991) considers syllabus as a subset of curriculum which deals with selection and gradation of linguistic content.

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010) the content of language syllabi includes different grammatical items, structures, vocabulary, rules, different situation, comprehension of text etc. that the learners need to learn. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) mention the following for syllabus.

“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.” (p-80)

As Yalden (1987) puts it a syllabus is a “summary of the content to which learners will be exposed”. (p-87) Widdowson (1987) defines syllabus as a statement of teaching program or pedagogic agenda that provides a specific subject to a specific group of learners.

As per Ur (1996), a syllabus is a list of elements to be taught, which can be accessible to everyone. The list contains words, structures, topics or tasks and methods. These items are arranged in a syllabus with increasing order of complexity and with an achievable objective. Ur discusses the way syllabuses are used by people. Some follow it strictly, some follow it rarely and some completely reproduce it as per their need. Nunan (1988) emphasizes that only a few instructors have the facility to design their own syllabus. According to Graves (1991), syllabus is a structure that contains details about a course its goals, objectives, topics and assessment pattern.

2. TYPES OF SYLLABI IN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Language syllabuses can be categorised on the basis of the content they focus on. Some syllabuses focus on the teaching of the grammatical or lexical forms where as the focus in some other syllabuses is the content or the text where language learning occurs indirectly. There are some syllabus types which emphasize on learning of language through some specified tasks where as some other syllabuses focus on the learning of different skills of language through meaningful activities. Keeping these factors under consideration different theorists have defined different types of syllabi with different terms.

2.1 Analytic and Synthetic syllabus

Syllabuses can be defined as being synthetic or analytic (Wilkins 1976). A synthetic syllabus includes different parts of language to be taught separately. Here the whole structure of language is learnt in a process of gradual accumulation of the parts learnt one after the other in a defined sequence. Rabbini (2002) mentions the focus of these syllabuses as what the learners will be able to know after the completion of the program. Analytic syllabus, on the contrary is arranged on the basis of the purpose for which people learn language and the types of language performance they are required to do to fulfil these purposes. Ur (2011) states that analytic syllabus does not include structural components of language particularly but it provide the learners the opportunity to learn the target language naturally through communicative interactions. Long and Crookes (1992) believe analytic syllabus presents the language as a whole without any linguistic control or reference.

2.2 Type A vs. Type B syllabi

White (1988) differentiates between Type A and Type B syllabus. He defines, Type A syllabus focuses on the content. It is more concerned with what is to be learnt than who are the learners and how it should be learnt. Type A syllabuses are represented by controlled practice where language items are incorporated in small discreet units in a particular sequence. Learners are expected to build language knowledge gradually. Teacher is the authority in the classroom. Type A syllabuses are product oriented synthetic syllabuses. Ellis (2005) emphasizes that the objectives are defined in advance in Type A syllabus.

According to White (1988) Type B syllabuses are based on how the language should be learned. The emphasis is given to the process rather than the product. The objectives of such syllabuses are based on the needs of the learners. These syllabuses do not work on the principle of pre-selecting and arranging the language elements. Rather it allows the learners and teachers to negotiate the objective on the basis of the needs of the learners. This syllabus is internal to the language learner as it emphasizes on process rather than the subject matter and it analyses

accomplishments according to the learner's requirements (Long and Crookes, 1992). The procedural, task-based syllabuses fall under the Type B category (White, 1988).

2.3 Product oriented Vs Process oriented syllabus

Another set of distinction between different syllabus types is the product-oriented and process-oriented syllabus. The product oriented syllabus focuses on the content. Nunan (1988) describes product oriented syllabus as the one in which the focus is on the end product which means the knowledge and skills the students should gain from the instruction. In this type of syllabus the language elements are pre-determined by the language analysts and are typically inventories of items which the learners are expected to master. Wilkins (1976) emphasizes that the product oriented syllabuses focus on product of learning and are intervened by the authority as the authorities decide the elements and the sequence in which they are to be taught. Wilkins (1976) considers the product oriented syllabuses to come under the category of synthetic syllabuses. The widely followed structural syllabus is a product oriented syllabus. Wilkins says the idea of pre-deciding set of structures is too confining for language teaching and learning and it is a way ignores the communicative purpose of the language. Krashen's (1985) Natural order hypothesis has been used by critics of product oriented syllabus to disqualify the system of selecting language items and basing teaching on this list. According to Widdowson (1978:248), communicative competence is not, "the compilation of items in memory, but a set of strategies or creative procedures for releasing the value of linguistic elements in contexts of use, an ability to make sense as a participant in discourse, whether spoken or written, by the skilful deployment of shared knowledge of code resources and rules of language use".

Such criticism gave rise to the necessity of an approach where the process of teaching will be focused. The result is process-oriented syllabus. Rabbini (2002) rightly points out the process oriented syllabus is the result of the failure of the product oriented syllabus as a tool to enhance

communication skills. In such a syllabus the focus shifts from what, to how language is learned. Nunan (1988) considers the point of departure for this syllabus to be the learning process through which skills and knowledge are acquired. Stenhouse (1975) one of the major proponents of process oriented syllabus say the syllabus design itself addresses the question of how language is learned. Candlin (1984) is of the view that this syllabus is a perfect combination content and method. Krashen's natural order theory comes in line with the basic premise for this syllabus. He says that human being is naturally programmed to learn a language and this occurs naturally through focusing on the meaning. He discards the idea of a pre-determined syllabus for language learning.

The theorists emphasize on using tasks and activities which focus on meaning to teach language. Prabhu (1987), Candlin (1984) and Breen (1987) advocate the process-oriented syllabus as they feel a pre-determined syllabus is redundant in a language classroom. Breen (1987) believes that the syllabus should give the teacher and the learner the opportunity to discuss and select the subject matter for language learning that is most important to them. Prabhu (1987) emphasizes on the use of communicative tasks in the classroom for boosting language learning. Cook (2001) considers process syllabus as an approach to learner autonomy. Richards and Schmidt (2010) define process syllabus to be the one that specifies the learning experiences and the process of language learning. Finney (2002) points out the purpose of learning of such syllabus is to enable the learners achieve self-fulfilment.

However, the process based syllabus also receives a lot of criticism for not having a formal field evaluation, assuming unrealistic level of competence, a drastic shift of responsibilities and authority in the classroom and radically redefining the roles of the teachers and learners in the classroom (Long and Crookes, 1992). Kumaravadivelu (2008) believes the process syllabus centres around unpredictable classroom interactions. Mc. Laughlin (1987) and Gregg (1984) criticised Krashen's theory to be based on the study of limited number of morphemes. Nunan (1988) and Van der Walt (1988) point out another problem of

process oriented syllabus that focuses on the use of various communicative tasks which focus on meaning. They argue that there is no agreement on what constitutes a proper task and they should be graded.

2.4 Cyclical Vs Linear syllabus

Dubin & Olshtain (1986) and Yalden (1983) defined another approach to the form of syllabus named the cyclical versus the linear syllabus. A linear syllabus is one in which the language item is dealt with once and never taken up again. It presumes the mastery of the item by the student with one appearance. The cyclical or spiral syllabus, on the other hand, deals with language items repeatedly with a greater degree of complexity each time, as the syllabus progresses.

The linear syllabus deals with language as a series of small discreet steps to be taught in a sequence and all add up to the overall behaviour desired at the end. Although a lot of language syllabi adopt a linear format, Corder (1973) opposes the idea as he believes; language learning is an interactive process. Corder argues for a cyclical pattern where the language items are taught repeatedly with increased complexity every time it is dealt next. Dulay, Burt, & Krashen (1982) and Ellis (1986) advocate the theory of the development linguistic competence, which also strengthens the argument for the cyclical syllabus. According to them language regularities emerge gradually and with an increasing degree of refinement.

Krahnke (1987) has defined six different types of syllabuses for language teaching.

1. Structural Syllabus- This syllabus focuses on learning language through its grammatical forms and structures. It is based on the theory of language that believes that the understanding of grammar and the structure of language is the base of any language learning. Hence, the content of language teaching is a collection of grammatical forms and structures such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, tense, types of sentences, clauses, questions, etc.

2. Notional/Functional Syllabus - According to Richards and Rogers (1986), notional/functionality is a theory of language. It proposes that the basis to

language is the uses to which it is put. The sociolinguistic approach of Hymes (1972) and the philosophical approach of Austin (1965) provided much of the theoretical basis notional/functionality in language teaching. The content of language teaching in this type of syllabus is a collection of functions which are performed while using the language or the notions that are expressed using the language. Examples of functions which Brumfit calls as the "communicative purposes" (1983, p.13) are approval, agreement, greetings, requesting, predicting, apologizing, etc. The notions or what Wilkins (1976) calls as semantic grammatical categories are time, duration, quantity, agent, instrument, place, etc.

3. Situational Syllabus - This syllabus includes a collection of real or imaginary situation as the content of language teaching. The situations involve activities in specific settings where several participants are engaged in conversation. The primary aim of situational syllabus is to teach language as it occurs in specific real life situations. The examples of situations are seeing a dentist, buying a book at the book store, complaining, meeting a friend, asking for direction in a new place, etc. However, Krahnke believes that the situations rarely make up the entire functions of language use.

4. Skill-based Syllabus - The skill based syllabus is based on the theory that breaking down language into small bits of skills is the best way to learn language. Hence, the skill based instructional content focuses on a reductionist theory of language which sees overall language system reducible to specific skills. The content of teaching in this syllabus is a collection of specific abilities that enables language use. It is different from situational syllabus in the sense that it focuses on mastering the linguistic competencies like pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, etc. The skills which are aimed in the syllabus are independent of specific settings or situations. The examples of skills are- reading skills like skimming and scanning, writing skills like summarizing & paraphrasing and writing specific discourse, speaking skills like delivering public talks and giving instructions and listening skills like getting specific information over telephone.

5. Content based Syllabus - The content based syllabus is primarily not a language teaching syllabus. In this approach the students learn the target language while studying a different content. In such process of instruction a different content is taught using the language the students need to learn. The class is simultaneously a language class as well as the subject that is taught. However, in such syllabuses the focus is always on the content. Language learning is secondary. It occurs incidentally with the content learning. The language learning is not planned or organised in such syllabus. An example of a content syllabus is a science class taught in the language the students need to learn.

6. Task-based Syllabus - In task-based syllabus the content of teaching is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students need to perform with the target language they are learning. The tasks have a function to perform other than language learning. Language learning takes place indirectly while performing the task. The approach of performing the task enables language learning. The tasks incorporate language skills in specific settings. The content based syllabus is concerned with information but the task based syllabus focuses on the communicative abilities. The tasks generally prompt the students to draw on resources to complete the task. The examples of tasks that promote language practice are applying for a job, conversation with a social worker, completing bureaucratic forms, getting information over phone, etc. The tasks in such syllabus creates the need to use the target language while performing the given tasks, hence, promotes language learning naturally.

Although Krahnke discusses all the six different syllabus types distinctly, independent of other types, but he believes, in practice, these syllabuses rarely occur independently. He mentions, almost all the language teaching syllabi are the combination of two or more of the syllabus types discussed above. In any curriculum, one type of syllabus usually remains dominant and other syllabus contents are additional elements. He further explains that all the six syllabus types are not completely distinct from each other. The distinction between certain syllabuses is minimal. The

distinguishing factor is normally the instructional method.

It is very difficult to decide which syllabus is better and which one to be followed. A syllabus cannot be exhaustive and comprehensive and cannot dictate the method, style and approach. The syllabus designers should consider the proficiency level of the learners at the beginning as well as at the end of the course. The major concern for the syllabus designers should be to enable the students to achieve competence in unplanned discourse (Ellis, 1984). The syllabus must create an optimal learning environment and must encourage unplanned discourse to be produced.

3. ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SYLLABUS DESIGN

Various theorists have differing views about the role of the teachers in designing a syllabus. Bell (1983) and Nunan (1993) claim that teachers are the users of other people's syllabuses as the syllabuses are prepared by applied linguists and government agencies and the teachers' role is to implement plans in the class. Nunan (1993) agrees to Bell (1983) that few teachers have relative freehand in designing their own syllabus. Nunan (1987) mentions that, some teachers believe the syllabus should be developed by people with specific expertise in the field. Hence, it is important that the teachers should be given appropriate training so that they can acquire the necessary skills and expertise to give their own touch to the syllabus they deal. Brindley(1984) suggests that the syllabus should be designed by the combined effort of the teachers as well as the students after a thorough analysis of the needs of the students.

4. ROLE OF A LANGUAGE SYLLABUS IN CURRICULUM

The ultimate aim of any language course is to enable the learners be proficient in all the language skills. The language syllabus is the important tool to achieve this goal. Language syllabuses generally aim at communicative competence. Yalden (1983) believes the syllabus is the teachers' primary instrument for language teaching. Brumfit (1984) emphasizes on the necessity of a syllabus for language teaching. He believes, the syllabus serves

all the practical purposes. He considers syllabus to be an administrative instrument that explains the aim of the teaching learning process. It provides a statement of work to be done. It specifies responsibilities, ensures progress and provides a common statement of reference for all.

Syllabus serves as a basic instrument for the evaluation of any program to examine whether the objective of the program has been fulfilled and whether it has stood up to the expectation of its stakeholders. Lee (1980:108) mentions, syllabus is a statement of what should be taught year by year and it specifies the method of teaching and time to be taken. Dubin & Olshtain (1997) define syllabus as a detailed statement of language elements to be taught. Syllabus specifies some defined objectives at each level which acts as a benchmark for the teachers as well as learners. A strong syllabus eases the process of teaching and learning by providing the route map. It presents a clear picture of the pattern of the course so that the course does not seem like disjointed assignments and activities but a well-organised and relevant journey. A good syllabus establishes a connection between objectives and assignments.

Littlefield (1999) defines the seven purposes a syllabus serves. They are, it sets the tone for a course, inspires the students to set specific achievable goals, is a planning for the faculty, structures the students efforts throughout the course, enables the teachers meet the goals timely, serves as a contract between faculty and students and is a portfolio material for tenure, promotion or job application.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:83-84) define the following as the purposes of the syllabus.

- To break the language down into units and provide basis for textbooks and instructions.
- To provide moral support to the teachers and the learners
- To reassure the stakeholders that a course is well planned

- To tell the students not only what they are to learn but why
- To direct the selection of materials, texts, tasks and exercises
- To ascertain uniformity in educational system
- To assess the success of students by providing a basis for testing

5. CONCLUSION

The above discussion highlighted key theoretical inputs in the designing of syllabus for a language curriculum. It is observed that syllabus plays a vital role in language curriculum. It sets the tone for the teaching and learning by providing a direction to the stakeholders. Different types of syllabi are used to serve different purposes. The various types discussed above are generally differentiated on the basis of the factors those are focused in the syllabus. Basically, the syllabi focus is either on the content (product) or the method of teaching (process). Hence, it is imperative to learn the needs of the learners before designing a language syllabus for a course.

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