

Course design – adapted from: COURSE AND MATERIALS DESIGN

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An introduction to course and syllabus design

1.1. Some definitions

Courses and syllabuses are generally perceived to be two different things, partly it must be admitted simply by customary collocation, given that the two terms are not always used indistinguishably. But a “course” might be taken to mean a real series of lessons (the particular course delivered last year to such and such a group of students and to be repeated again this year), while a “syllabus” can be taken to be something rather more abstract, with fewer details of the blow by blow conduct of individual lessons. Thus you and I might quite properly write rather different courses, with different materials, but based on the same syllabus. This happens a lot in publishing. For example when notions and functions became popular as a basis for course design, each major ELT publisher published a course based on what became known as a 'notional/functional' syllabus, often using the Council of Europe staged language taxonomies as a basis e.g. van Ek, J 1975. And each course was different. However, when one is in the short course market, (often ESP), it can work the other way round as Graves, 1996, shows. This is after all a book on course design rather than syllabus design, and Graves takes White's (1988) definition: 'A syllabus will be defined narrowly as the specification and ordering of content of a course or courses.' (Graves 1996:3). So, you may start with the demand for a course, for a specific group of learners over a specific length of time, and then you design a syllabus for it. As far as the word “design” is concerned, it is fair to point out, that it too may be tested and evaluated. A major point of debate in contemporary debate in course design is concerned precisely with how much design should go into a particular course, that is, how much should be negotiated with the learners, how much predetermined by the teacher, and how much left to chance and the mood of the participants on the day. This notion is bound up with the idea of the “focus on the learner”, to repeat the title of a well-known book, and more recently with ideas of control and initiative in the classroom. (We shall return to some of these ideas later.)

The above, though, are not major problems for most learners and scholars. Some people, however, get mired down in the task of differentiating between Course or Syllabus Design and Methodology, a task it is probably necessary to undertake at the level of broad outline and futile and frustrating if the attempt is made to delve into minutiae. Roughly, one would want to say that CSD is concerned with the content of what gets taught and the organisation of this (into bits of grammar, or functions, or what have you), while Methodology is concerned with the how. This, however, is a question it is best not to consider too closely. It is disingenuous in the extreme to suppose that the “what” of teaching is put together without reference to the “how”; contemporary syllabuses are almost always designed with a particular - generally broadly communicative - methodology in mind. And scholars have muddied the waters still further by misappropriating the word “communicative”, which ought to be a matter of methodology but is commonly used to refer to syllabus design.

1.2. Syllabuses as lists

Let us begin by assuming an air of complete naïveté. Let us temporarily move away from the exigencies of the classroom, the sponsor and our director who want something now, and presume nothing at all. What is a syllabus?

Well, it involves a list. Perhaps we might say, a list of things we want our learners to learn in the English class. So, what do we want them to learn?

There are four problems here:

- what we want them to learn could be extremely varied;
- some of the things we want them to learn are easy to articulate;
- others are not; the “what” and the “how” of learning are intimately, and perhaps inextricably, bound up;
- our formulation assumes that we do indeed want a pre-established list of things to be learned.

We will be returning to all these problems at various points during this module, but I want to begin by looking at what these pre-established lists of things might consist of and giving some overviews of ways in which people have attempted to classify and organise them.

1.3 Ways of specifying content of a language syllabus

CONTENT SKILL METHOD

TOPIC

Informational LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS PROCEDURAL

Structural focus focus Receptive/ Skill Learning Cognitive

Productive acquisition focus focus

focus Learner-led Task-based

SITUATION

Contextual focus

Notional/Functional focus

Figure 1 Bases for language syllabus design (sources: White (1988); ovals, Breen (1987); rectangles, Allen (1984)

Finally, Willis D summarises major approaches to syllabus design, making an explicit distinction between discrete item and holistic modes, and looking at focus and content for each. See Figure 2.

MODE FOCUS CONTENT

Grammar

Linguistic Lexis

Discrete item

(Type A) Phonology

Notions

Semantic/

Pragmatic

Functions

SYLLABUS TYPE

(Skills)

Topics

Holistic Learning Tasks

(Type B) process

(Skills)

Nowadays, you are unlikely to find a course book or indeed a course that uses only one of these forms of specification. But more often than not, even in the "Multi-syllabus" Course books, there will be one or two major organising factors, such as grammar and/or functions, with topics selected to illustrate the grammatical or functional items. Other features like lexis, phonology, and skills practice are often subservient to the main strands and are built in along the way.

Prabhu, by contrast, bases his syllabus on sets of tasks, each set grouped around a specific topic, such as school timetables or journeys. This is an example of a totally holistic approach: his syllabus contains no overt itemistic linguistic specifications at all; words, meanings and patterns arise naturally out of the topic and task and are supplied or explained by the teacher when needed, in the same way as a subject teacher would.

You could also take as a starting point a set of simple tasks that are built around the use of known words or cognates, and from this lead on to the study of naturally occurring phrases and grammatical patterns - for examples, see Willis J 1996 (b): 119-123.

Mohan's recommended starting point for ESL learners is topic and content (Mohan 1986 described briefly in Nunan 1988: pp49-51) Each topic is then exploited systematically within a given framework leading to the production of language teaching materials.

All these approaches have a rationale behind them which stems from what we knew or now know about the 'how' of learning - revealing some truth in the third problem statement in 1.2 above. We will, however, leave these 'how's and 'why's for discussion in Unit 2.

1.4 Influences on syllabus design

The process of designing a syllabus for a particular group of learners is actually a very practical business, and common sense plays an important part. It is not in itself a theoretical field. However, syllabus design is necessarily parasitic on other research and, as mentioned in the previous section, theories of language learning and contemporary views on language are two such areas. The more we know about language and its uses, the more alternatives we have for ways of specifying language on our syllabus. The more we find out about how people best learn languages, the more options we have for selecting and grading content and materials and choosing an appropriate methodology to act as a vehicle for our syllabus. So whenever a new theory arises, it should be examined carefully to see what implications it may have for language learning and teaching.

Political and economic factors may also stimulate a change in syllabus design. For example, the opening up of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s led to the demise of Russian teaching and a huge demand for teachers able to teach English of an international nature, for trade and educational links, and also for young learners. New syllabuses were needed for the ex-Russian teachers to enable them both to learn English for international purposes and to learn new methods to teach it to children.

Advances in technology have also contributed to change. In the past, the availability of tape recorders, for example, and then language laboratories, certainly helped to popularise and establish syllabuses based on Behaviourist principles - a little bit of language at a time, each taught and 'learnt' to perfection. Now, computers enable huge corpora of language to be collected and analysed; databases can be stored and updated with ease. This has enormous implications for syllabus design.

Beliefs about the language learning process commonly affect language policy and course design. For example, the belief that children can learn a foreign language better the younger they are has led governments to lower the age for beginning a foreign language down to primary level - hence the growing trend for the introduction of Primary English, with its subsequent 'knock-on' effects on syllabuses right through the schools. It is not on our agenda at this point to discuss the pros and cons of this, though I must add that according to some recent research, this is considered to be a possibly mistaken belief - it all depends on what you mean by 'better' and on the conditions in which the young learners are taught.

There are other factors that contribute to change in curriculum, syllabus and course design too.

Major factors that contribute to change in curriculum, syllabus and course design

LINGUISTIC THEORIES LEARNING THEORIES

changes in views of languages evidence about how people learn

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC PEDAGOGIC EXPERIENCE

SOCIAL CHANGE

long-term needs teachers'/students' views

classroom research

testing

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES EDUCATIONAL VIEWS

e.g. from other fields

OTHER?

1.5.2 Education or Training?

In an influential passage, Widdowson (1983) distinguishes between these two terms, not in any absolute sense, but:

as a device for clarifying what seem to me to be important differences in pedagogic principle. This device can be thought of as a scale, with training at one end and education at the other.

As regards training, Widdowson (p.17) quotes Peters approvingly:

.... a person could be a trained ballet-dancer or have mastered an eminently worthwhile skill, such as pottery-making, without being educated. What might be lacking is something to do with knowledge and understanding; for being educated demands more than being highly skilled. An educated man must also possess some body of knowledge and some kind of conceptual scheme to raise this above the level of a collection of disjointed facts. This implies some understanding of principles for the organisation of facts. (1983:17)

This general distinction is in fairly common parlance in certain parts of the world (in the Gulf, certainly).

The idea is of education being long-term, somehow an end in itself, ranging broadly and deeply across and

into large areas, dealing with the fostering of abilities (this too is a familiar distinction, subtly drawn by Widdowson); training on the other hand is in essence short-term, has a predetermined and clearly specified purpose, and has as its aim the fostering of skills. Thus the foundations of physics laid at school is a matter of education. Learning to be a plumber is a matter of training.

Broad-based EGP is a matter of education, English for plumbers of training. There is a distinction between the “practical deployment” (Widdowson’s phrase) associated with training skills, on a course which examines no underlying principles, and the “knowledge and understanding of these principles” (Widdowson again) which is typical of educational courses. The former is skill-based (Widdowson, perhaps a little tendentiously, describes skills as “mechanical”, “a repertoire of responses tagged with appropriate stimulus indicators”), the latter ability-based.

And Widdowson makes one further point, a very important one for his case. Pointing out that foreign and second language teaching of any type is concerned with “skills” in Peters’ sense - in any class you might have to give the English word for “table” or “screwdriver” and it is fatuous in the extreme to seek here for an underlying principle at stake - he suggests:

an educational approach (that is, in ELT) is one which develops an understanding of principles in order to extend the range of their application. A person educated in a certain language, as opposed to one who is trained only in its use for a restricted set of predictable situations, is someone who is able to relate what he or she knows to circumstances other than those which attended the acquisition of that knowledge ...

education in a language presupposes the internalisation of what Halliday calls ‘meaning potential’. It is the ability to realise this potential that I refer to as capacity.

Thus in sum:

training seeks to impose a conformity to certain established patterns of knowledge and behaviour, usually in order to carry out a set of clearly defined tasks Education, however, seeks to provide for creativity whereby what is learned is a set of schemata and procedures for adapting them to cope with problems which do not have a ready-made formulaic solution.

This is the essence of Widdowson’s case. In one way it is sufficiently familiar to be unexceptionable: but it is pointed with such subtlety that it bears considerable examination.

1.5.4 The syllabus as an empty shell

“Can we be so sure that all the knowledge we would like to be exposed to and gain from a syllabus can be so clearly identified as items?” Consider the thrust of this: we can, and do, organise all our teaching round - and in ESP often quite explicitly round - the notion of language needs. The possibility of the student having other needs is something we recognise, but deal with only in the most unprincipled of ways. At best, we will deal head on with the possibility that educationally unsophisticated students may

there is nothing worse than for a TEFL teacher to think s/he is only a language teacher, yet most syllabuses exist to reinforce the impression that language is all and only what the game is about.

The syllabus can act as a straitjacket. Where the class is taught generally as a group, in lockstep, with everyone doing the same thing at the same time, it is inevitable that some will suffer from this. The answer to this problem, of course, is to negotiate the syllabus at the start of the course, and probably again during it on a number of occasions. The results of truly negotiated syllabuses - ignoring for the moment as quite impossible a priori that such negotiations will simply result in the teacher imposing his/her own wishes slowly and by argument rather than suddenly and tacitly - are not, however, always recognisable as anything one would want to recognise as a syllabus, particularly where repeated negotiation is concerned, precisely because the notion of coherent, expert planning is at the heart of the matter.

If a syllabus is not in fact a commercially purchased coursebook, adherence to it is very often sporadic, particularly if it is not backed up by a test which directly mirrors it, and indeed its very existence may often be doubted, sometimes being replaced by nothing, sometimes by an ad hoc collection of photocopied pages from a range of different sources, sometimes at least by the accumulated wisdom of staff who have taught similar courses. Moreover, the strict procedure one tends to find in diagrams, by which “Syllabus Design” happens at a precise and well-defined moment of time (just after Needs Analysis) in the long, confident and stately advance from this last to post-course Evaluation, is frequently a mirage - a point that Waters, (1997) makes strongly.

And just how often do we get a chance to design a syllabus or course from scratch? What normally happens is that we adapt an existing course, or supplement a course with “new” materials to fulfil the most recently identified objective.

Ultimately, syllabus design is a bit of a balancing act - it must surely involve careful consideration of three major areas: it must take account of the learning situation, with its resources and constraints but it must also take account of how people learn languages, and - equally important to my mind - it needs to identify what language will be useful for learners in their target situation and ensure reasonable coverage of and exposure to that language. And I would argue that this applies to all courses - whether they be for general or for specific purposes. But it is up to you to come to your own decision - and justify this in the light of the theory and evidence you have gained from your own practice, reading and reflection.

1.6 Audiences for syllabus statements

So far we have taken for granted that the syllabus is a document that teachers, learners and text-book writers may want to refer to, but are there other possible audiences? To finish this unit, you might like to think about the following task:

Zdroj (here the references can also be found:

<http://www.philselfsupport.com/coursematerialsdesign.htm>