

The Basic Requirements of the Multi-Syllabus Syllabus

Abstract

This article aims at providing a description of the basic principles and the fundamental requirements of the different syllabuses in the field of foreign language learning/ teaching. It is also intended to give an illustration of the kind of framework for a foreign language syllabus teachers should like to see implemented. It goes without saying that a successful course which is more eagerly looked for is the one which combines all essential aspects: structure, function, situation, topic, skills in an integrated and coherent way.

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ملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى عرض ووصف لما تقتضيه مختلف المقررات في مجال تعليم اللغات من شروط ومعايير مع التركيز أساساً على المقرر المتعدد البرامج الذي يود المدرسون تطبيقه. ومما لا شك فيه أن أنجع منهج تعليمي وأشمل برنامج تدريسي هما اللذان يمزجان بين كل العناصر الأساسية من نحو ووظائف لغوية وسياق وموضوع ومهارات لغوية وذلك بطريقة منسجمة ومنكاملة.

Introduction

A range of different types of syllabuses are available in foreign language teaching . The selection of a syllabus should be relevant to the intended learners , appropriate to the situation and fulfil the aims of a specific curriculum. The main types which constitute the object of the present study are :the grammatical syllabus , the situational syllabus , the notional- functional syllabus the skill- based syllabus , the topic-based syllabus, and the multi –syllabus.

1. Syllabus: a definition

A syllabus can be defined as a guide or a programme for teachers by providing some goals to be achieved. Mc Donough and Shaw (1993:13) define a syllabus as: “The overall organizing principle for what is to be taught and learned. In other words, it is a general statement as to the pedagogical arrangement of learning context.” It is a statement on the nature of language and learning, an expression of opinion of what is to be taught and learned.

Prabhu (1987:86) refers to it as: “a form of support to the teaching activity that is to be carried out in the classroom and a form of guidance in the construction of appropriate lesson plans.”

The different criteria that ought to be taken into account by a syllabus designer while deciding about a course have been identified by Ellis (1988:202) as follows:

- (a) The syllabus should list and sequence the items of linguistic knowledge that are to be taught.
- (b) The syllabus should list and possibly sequence the language functions and notions (together with the linguistic exponents) that are mastered.
- (c) The syllabus should list the discourse processes that the learner needs to employ in order to participate in interpersonal interaction.
- (d) The syllabus should list and sequence the communicative activities in which the learners will be asked to participate.

However, one can notice that , in addition to the criteria that have already been mentioned , there are further essential factors a syllabus designer needs to take in to consideration notably, situations , topics and skills .

2. The grammar Syllabus

The grammar syllabus is also referred to as ‘the structural syllabus’. According to Widdowson (1979:240) “The belief here is that what has to be taught is a knowledge of the language system: its exploitation for communicative purposes can be left to the learner”. This type of syllabus is considered as the most prevalent. The selection and grading of the content is done according to the simplicity and complexity of grammatical items and consists of a collection of forms and structures of the language being taught such as: nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, clauses, etc. Thanks to a sequenced list of items, the learner will gradually acquire a knowledge of grammatical structures and will eventually understand the grammatical system of the language. This syllabus is then based on the belief that the learners need to learn simple structures first and then move systematically on to more complex ones. Mares (2003:134) sees that moving away from the linear grammar-based syllabus has become a vital necessity: “The goal of a course book should be to provide the learner with comprehensive input and to expose the learner to as much language as possible in an engaging way, over time, rather than prescribe what should be learned.”

This can be illustrated by an example taken from Mc Donough and Shaw (1993:23)

- Unit 1 Present simple and position of time adverbs
- 2 Present continuous
- 3 Simple past tense regular and irregular verbs
- 4 Mass and unit
- 5 Some, any, a few, a little
- 6 Past tense with ‘Ago’ and questions with ‘How long ago?’
- 7 Adjectives and adverbs
- 8 Comparison of adverbs
- 9 Going to do
- 10 Requests and offers and Take/ get/ bring/ show someone something
- 11 Present perfect with ‘for’ and ‘since’
- 12 Have been doing/ have just done/ haven’t done yet/ had better do

- 13 Past continuous and past simple
 - 14 Simple future used in requests, offers, and of 'must' and 'can'
 - 15 Present perfect + 'just' + preview of contrast with simple past
 - 16 Present perfect and past simple
 - 17 Frequent gerund constructions
 - 18 Future simple with 'if' or 'when' and present simple clause
 - 19 Common patterns with verb + him/ her/ etc. + infinitive with/ without 'to'
 - 20 Future in the past
 - 21 Past perfect
 - 22 Conditional sentences
 - 23 Passive voice in present perfect and past
 - 24 Reported speech
 - 25 Past conditional
- Irregular verb list

A fundamental criticism is that such a syllabus focuses only on one aspect of language, namely grammar, and ignores many more important aspects of language.

Despite the fact that this syllabus has been proved successful throughout a long period of time, methodologists have tried to put in to practise another syllabus whose main organizing foundation must not be the grammatical rules of the language.

3. The situational syllabus

The attention has shifted from teaching grammatical items, vocabulary topics, or functions to pupils' needs and interests. The major concerns of this syllabus is to present language in different real-life situations through dialogues such as: at the post office, at the railway station, at the supermarket, at the restaurant, coming through immigration, shopping in an open-air market, making enquiries in a department store, at the check-out desk...

Here, the syllabus designer will not find difficulty in defining everyday situations, people who are likely to take part in the conversation, and the communicative goals. From the various dialogues the learners are introduced to, there are some points which have to be born in mind:

- The learners must understand very well the context and the place where the dialogue occurs: a bank, hotel reception, railway station, etc.
- The learners must understand the type of relationship maintained between people who are involved in the conversation whether they are relatives, friends, a teacher and a pupil, a customer and a receptionist, and employee and a boss, a doctor and a patient, etc...
- The learners must develop the ability to predict and imagine what could happen.

The advantage of this syllabus is that motivation will be heightened since it is "learner – rather than subject-centered", (Wilkins, 1976:16)

In spite of its merits, the situational approach has not been proved so efficient since it rather operates more successfully with tourism students. A foreigner on holiday in Britain might find learning very significant since he has been thoroughly trained and exposed to situations he is most likely to meet. Meanwhile, this syllabus does not actually answer the needs of students of general English because first it is not an easy

task to assure that language used in one situation can also be used in another. .Second and more importantly, choosing which situations to introduce for a general class cannot be readily achieved because there are several points that one should consider: background and personality, the country in which the learner is learning English. Consequently, the situational syllabus and particularly situations do not frequently constitute the common core and the real frame in general syllabus design.

4. The Notional/ Functional Syllabus

This syllabus which has had a significant impact on syllabus design takes as its main starting point language functions and notions the learner needs in order to communicate successfully in a wide range of situations.

Notions and functions can be defined as how particular meanings can be achieved in language. So, both of them are used to describe language semantically. The learner needs to be equipped with a wide range of notions in the foreign language such as: past time, future time, space, quantity, location, travel, education, size, age, colour and so on. Such notions are expressed through communicative functions. A function, thus, is seen as how to use language in order to achieve a particular purpose, examples would be: expressing likes, dislikes, preferences; expressing opinions, feelings, reactions; agreeing and disagreeing; inviting; making suggestions; apologizing....etc while describing this approach, Wilkins (1978:28) points out that:

It is potentially superior to the grammatical syllabus because it will produce a communicative competence and because its evident concern with the use of language will sustain the motivation of the learner. It is superior to the situational syllabus because it can ensure that the most important grammatical forms are included and because it can cover all kinds of language functions, not only those that typically occur in certain situations.

The focus shifts from teaching a collection of forms and structures to teaching of functions performed when language is used and notions that language is used to express. Communicative skills constitute the focus of this syllabus type.

Here, the task of the syllabus designer is to look for the different ways of expressing each function. For instance, here are some ways of offering to do something: Mc Donough and Shaw (1993: 38)

- Let me get it for you.
- Shall I get it for you?
- Any point in my getting it for you?
- How about my getting it for you?
- Would you like me to get it for you?
- Do you want some help?
- Let me give you a hand.
- Can I help you with that? ...

There are also some useful ways of asking permission (Ibid : 38).

- I'm going to ...
- I thought I might ...
- D 'you mind if I...?
- Is it alright if I ...?

- Would it be alright if I ...?
- Would you mind if I ...?
- I wonder if I could possibly ... ?

An example of a typical course book, as has been provided by Mc Donough and Christopher Shaw (ibid, 24), will consist of the following:

Contents

Introduction to the student

1. Talking about yourself, starting a conversation, making a date (p3).
2. Asking for information: question techniques, answering techniques, getting more information (p9).
3. Getting people to do things: requesting, attracting attention, agreeing and refusing (p14).
4. Talking about past events: remembering, describing experiences, imaging 'what if...'(p 20).
5. Conversation techniques: hesitating, preventing interruptions and interrupting politely, bringing in other people (p25).
6. Talking about the future: stating intentions, discussing probability, considering 'what if...'(p 30).
7. Offering to do something, asking permission, giving reasons (p36).
8. Giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, discussing (p41).
9. Describing things, instructing people how to do things, checking understanding (p46).
10. Talking about similarities, talking about differences, stating preferences (p51).
11. Making suggestions and giving advice, expressing enthusiasm, persuading (p58).
12. Complaining, apologizing and forgiving, expressing disappointments.
13. Describing places, describing people (p 70).
14. Telling a story: narrative techniques, handling a dialogue, controlling a narrative (p76).
15. Dealing with moods and feelings: anger, sadness, indifference, saying goodbye (p82).

The problem which the syllabus designer will meet is how to decide on the grading of functions in a way that suits the needs of all the learners. Here, we can undoubtedly say that the course will rather look as a tourist phrase book. It is quite possible for the learner to know the immediate application of the language but cannot easily create language to suit his needs in different situations.

5. The skill-based syllabus

The skill-based syllabus basically attempts to develop among the learners specific abilities that may contribute in using language. To be competent in a language, people must be able to do what we call "skills". This syllabus is another framework around which to organize language and the content of language teaching so as to learn the specific language skill. The primary purpose of a skill-based syllabus is to group linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse) together for the sake of achieving generalized types of behaviour, for example:

- Listening to spoken language to find out and understand the main idea.
- Writing well-formed paragraphs.
- Giving effective oral presentations.

It is true that to be competent in a language, the learners must be able to develop both receptive and productive skills. However, it is important to bear in mind that linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) should be associated with specific settings of language use.

6. The Topic-based syllabus

The ultimate goal of this syllabus is that language can be organized in relation to different topics, for example: travelling, the weather, space, science and technology, music, art, sports, the environment and so on. Each topic, in its turn, can be subdivided further to include other themes; for instance, the topic “pollution” can cover the following:

- a) Types of pollution: air, water, land, noise.
- b) Causes of pollution.
- c) Consequences.
- d) Solutions.

“Topics provide a welcome organising principle in that they can be based on what student will be interested in” (Harmer , 2001: 298)

This type of syllabus is organized according to topics which may be relevant to the learners and appropriate to their interests and utility. However, such an organization has not been proved satisfactorily enough to rely completely upon.

These five types of syllabus have been illustrated by means of examples by Mc Donough (1993:14) as follows:

1. Grammatical or structural
2. Functional- notional
3. Situational
4. Skills based
5. Topic based

<p>Simple past, irregular verbs (1) The passive Formation of adverbs Type 3 conditionals Gerunds and infinitive</p>	<p>Making suggestions Asking for directions 2 (a) Giving advice Introducing yourself Location 2 (b) Duration Ability</p>
<p>In the restaurant At a hotel (3) In the post-office At a garage</p>	<p>Making notes from a talk (4) Reading for information Using a dictionary Writing an exam answer</p>
<p>Space travel (5) Intelligence tests Smoking The weather</p>	

Introducing the learners to relevant and stimulating topics is an essential requirement in language teaching; yet, relying exclusively on topics is not enough to achieve successful results.

7. The multi-syllabus syllabus

From what has been mentioned in terms of syllabuses and the different aspects of language, each syllabus focuses on, we can say that we are looking forward to implementing a syllabus which combines, fuses, and gives equal importance to various different syllabus models in general and a variety of units, including word, structure, notion, function, topic, and situation in particular.

White (1988:92) comments “A complete syllabus specification will include all five aspects: structure, function, situation, topic, skills. The difference between syllabuses will lie in the priority given to each of these aspects.”

It is crucial for a successful course book to combine aspects of a language teaching program and consider eclecticism as a common feature: as Hutchinson and Waters (1987:89) observe: “Any teaching material must, in reality, operate several syllabuses at the same time. One of them will probably be used as the principal organizing feature, but the others are still there.” To illustrate this, The New Cambridge English Course serves as a good model of a complete English language course which will incorporate at least eight main syllabuses as specified below:

- **Vocabulary:** Students must acquire a ‘core’ vocabulary of the most common and useful words in the language, as well as learning more words of their own choice.
- **Grammar:** Basic structures must be learnt and revised.
- **Pronunciation:** Work is important for many students. Learners need to speak comprehensively, and to understand people with different accents speaking in natural conditions (not just actors speaking Standard English in recording studios).

- **Notions:** Students must know how to refer to common concepts such as sequence, contrast, or purpose.
- **Functions:** Learners must be able to do things such as complaining, describing, suggesting, or asking for permission in English.
- **Situations:** a course must teach the stereotyped expressions associated with situations like shopping, making travel enquiries, booking hotel rooms, telephoning, etc.
- **Topics:** Students need to learn the language used to talk about subjects of general interest. The course book should include some controversial and emotionally engaging material, rather than sticking to bland middle-of-the-road 'safe' topics.
- **Skills:** Learners need systematic practice in both receptive and productive skills. Reading and listening work will include some authentic interviews and texts, as well as specially written material. In fact, as Clarke (1991:13) suggests: "there have always been various suggestions concerning the possibility of eclecticism and the fusing together of the elements from various different syllabus models".

The course book that is designed to cover an adequate course should combine different aspects: topics, functions and notions, as well as grammar and vocabulary for an effective teaching program.

Conclusion

To sum up, one of the major requirements of a successful course book is to incorporate all basic items: grammar, vocabulary, language functions, situations, topics, and pronunciation to enable the learners to achieve effective and confident communication. By integrating all the possible factors from the different types of syllabuses and relating them to each other, a compromise between the different organising elements can be achieved.

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