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An overview of syllabuses in teaching English for Specific Purposes

Abstract

When teaching courses of English for Specific Purpose, the course instructor is mainly concerned with finding and adapting the type of syllabus which best equips learners with skills and knowledge in order to meet the learners' future language needs. The article starts with describing the main types of syllabuses there are in English Language Teaching (ELT) and emphasizes that the syllabus designer must keep in mind many important criteria when choosing to design and implement a syllabus, especially in ESP. The various syllabuses described in this article are valuable input for the syllabus designer in creating a language program and course. The twelve types of syllabuses are examined and defined in separate contexts and it is almost impossible for one type of syllabus to be used and be successful in one English Language Teaching settings. It is becoming more and more convenient to use the integration of some types of syllabus. In ESP, like in most other courses, the syllabus gives details the content of what the learners will be taught during the course. It is through the syllabus that the teacher and the learner are able to measure progress. What is particular in ESP, it is the needs analysis process which is carried out prior to syllabus design which determines which language skills are needed by the learner. ESP makes extensive use of content-based approaches. Teaching activities are specific to the subject matter being taught and are arranged in a way to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the needed language.

Finally, the article draws on the types of syllabuses studied to suggest on the most appropriate syllabuses to be used when considering designing a course of English for specific purposes. The recommendation is based on the essential features of ESP, that is the analysis of the needs of the learner and based on this criteria some syllabuses such as task-based, and content based are recommended.

Keywords: Syllabus design; English for Specific Purposes; need analysis, task-based, content-based

1-Introduction

Over the past two decades, syllabus design and teaching of English as a foreign language have come to reflect considerably the specific needs of students. Different institutions engaged in Teaching English as a foreign language despite teaching general English, have been increasingly offering English for Specific Purposes in order to meet the demand of the learners who might need English to perform in their job positions. The increase in the demand has primarily come out from the requirements of the international institutions, corporations, industries, businesses, offices and government agencies whose employees are usually required to have a good command of English language in order to deal with business-related activities. Therefore, when Albania opened up to the world after the nineties and committed to free and international trade after entering the free trade economy, language schools and universities rushed to provide to include English for Specific purpose in their curricula in order to produce students who would be able to compete more successfully in the job market and progress in their career. The same trend had happened throughout the world after the Second World War and since then English has been considered as lingua franca. What makes ESP different from general English is that it is centered toward the needs of the learners and consequently the syllabus is usually focused on a specified group of topics related to a particular profession in the job market, such as law, business, agriculture, aviation, engineering, etc. Therefore ESP courses are designed in a way that they do not make use of exclusively one single approach to syllabus design, but taking in consideration the principal criteria "the needs of the learner" use many approaches by drawing on elements mainly (but not limited) from a task-based syllabus, a situated syllabus, and a content-based syllabus.

When trying to define the process of syllabus design in ELT, Munby (1978:2-3) stated that ESP courses should be those where the syllabus and the materials were determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner. In the early phases of ESP syllabus design, most syllabus designers started out by drawing up lists of grammatical, phonological, and vocabulary items. The task for the learner was seen as gaining mastery over these grammatical, phonological, and vocabulary items.

It was not until the 1970s, that the communicative approaches to language teaching began to be incorporated into syllabus design. The central question for proponents of this new view was, 'What does the learner want and need to do with the target language?' rather than, 'What are the linguistic elements which the learner needs to master? Syllabuses began to appear in whirls content was specified, not only in terms of the grammatical elements whirls the learners were expected to master, but also in terms of the functional skills they would need to master in order to communicate successfully.

The language in an ESP Course is not the subject matter, but is being learned as part of the process of acquiring some quite different body of knowledge or set of skills (Robinson, 1980) According to Philips (1981, p.92), the element that gives ESP its identity as a distinctive area of language teaching activity is the learners' purpose. This purpose is not restricted to linguistic competence only, but involves the mastery of skills in which language forms and integral part,

The designing of the syllabus for English for Specific Purposes poses the issue about the kind of English the learners want and need to acquire. Even though many syllabus designers are aware of the many subdivision within ESP, they assert that learners generally need English either for work, EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) or for academic purposes EAP (English for Academic Purposes).

2-Main types of syllabuses in ELT

No single syllabuses entirely different from any other type of syllabus. The syllabuses in language teaching arena integrated product of two or more of the types of syllabuses that will be listed below. Thus, although there have been various language teaching syllabuses introduced in this article, each independently described with their own peculiarities, rarely can they be found in isolated use in a given course. Usually, one type of syllabus is central for the course, while other types of content might be integrated and serve as complementary. In general, it is difficult to make a distinction between the content-based and topic-based syllabuses or task-based and skill-based syllabus. It is the instructional content used in the real teaching procedure which makes the determining factor in choosing a particular syllabus. The following list describes the main types of syllabuses used in Teaching Languages by paying special importance to En-

glish for Specific purposes.

1. A procedural syllabus

This syllabus presents the question of *"how* "the learner learns language because it is more concerned with the methodology in terms of "processes of learning and procedures of teaching" (White1988: 94). Proposed initially by Prabhu the procedural syllabus emphasizes that "that structure can best be learned when attention is focused on meaning",Prabhu (1980). From the title itself, a procedural syllabus gives importance to the activity, focusing on learning rather than linguistics. White (1988: 102) states that in this syllabus the focus is on the task and that it is learning-centered instead of learner-centered, consequently it is centered on graded tasks grouped by similarity, where it is the tasks and activities which are being planned in advance but not the linguistic content. The role of the syllabus designer in this aspect is to arrange the course around activities such as matching, simulation and gap filling and the learner is preoccupied with perceiving the language, understanding, working out, relating or conveying messages. Formally there is no syllabus with a structure, but "there is a mutual planning between learner and teacher, which leads to language learning, content, and actions explored and accomplished",Candlin (1987: 6). Therefore the learners acquire the language subconsciously while aiming to solve the meaning lying behind the tasks. Despite some differences in practice, the principles underlying procedural and task-based syllabuses are very similar. In fact, they are seen as synonymous by Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985), who describe them both as follows:

... a syllabus which is organized around tasks, rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary. For example the syllabus may suggest a variety of different kinds of tasks which the learners are expected to carry out in the language, such as using the telephone to obtain information; drawing maps based on oral instructions; performing actions based on commands given in the target language; giving orders and instructions to others, etc. It has been argued that this is a more effective way of learning a language since it provides a purpose for the use and learning of a language other than simply learning language items for their own sake.(Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985: 289)

2. A situational syllabus

This type of syllabus put more importance to the situational needs of the learner rather than the grammatical units of the language. The Syllabus is arranged round a number of situations which represent language and behavior used in real life situations, outside the classroom. The rationale behind this syllabus is that language is part and parcel of the situations and contexts in which takes place. The syllabus designer uses the intuition in order to foresee the situations in which the learner might engage oneself, and makes use of these situations, for example; having small business talk, talking over the phone or giving instructions. The structure of the syllabus and the content of language teaching is a cohort of real or made up situations in which language occurs. The situations introduced in most parts present a number of participants who are engaged in an activity in a specific setting. These situations use language which includes a number of functions combined in part with available discourse activity. The situational language teaching syllabus aims at teaching language that occurs in the particular situations.

3. A skill-based syllabus

Skills are defined as abilities that people must be able to mastering order to be more proficient in a language. The content of this syllabus relies on learners' particular skills in using the language. A skill-based syllabus merges linguistic competencies (pronunciation, grammar, and discourse) with types of behavior, such as listening to a podcast for the gist, writing academic paragraphs, delivering successful speeches etc. Examples of reading skills may include skimming and scanning; writing may include writing memos or reports; speaking skills may involve giving instructions or personal information, and listening may consist of extracting specific information. This syllabus has as a chief principle the development of learners' abilities and competence in a foreign/second language and a secondary purpose of learning information incidentally available while applying the language skills. The ability to use language in some particular ways is partly dependent on general language ability, partly based on the user's experience and the need for a given skill.

4. A structural or formal syllabus

Also known as the traditional syllabus which is often organized along grammatical lines giving greater importance to language form, the structural syllabus holds the theory that functional ability arises from structural knowledge, and the focus is on the outcomes or the product. This syllabus aims at enabling the learner to increase the grammar collection by being instructed each structural step as well as using highly controlled, tightly structured and sequenced pattern practice exercises. Sentences are grammatically defined as simple, compound and complex. Morphology can also be found in structural syllabi. The language content of the structural syllabuses has been defined by Wilkins (1976) through the following items:

- *The notions or concepts the learners need to talk about,*

- *The functional purposes for which language is used,*

- *The situations in which language would be used, and*

- *The roles the learners might possibly play.*

5. A task-based syllabus

Language learning is considered dependent to task performance and language teaching occurs when the need for language arises during the performance of a particular task, therefore the tasks are best defined as activities with a particular purpose other than language learning in order to develop language proficiency.

The task-based syllabus enables the learners by using tasks and activities to make use of the language communicatively and purposefully. This syllabus specifies that the skill of speaking a language is best perfected through interaction and practice in a given situation. The course designer keeps in mind that tasks must be appropriate to the real life language needs of the learners. The tasks should be a meaningful in order to yield progress in the learning process. In the task- based syllabus, a number of multidimensional and focused tasks that the students want or need to carry out are presented with

the aid of the target language. These above mentioned tasks are a combination of language and other skills in specific contexts.

6. A process syllabus

Also thought of as 'task-based' or 'procedural' (McDonough & Shaw 1993:60), this type of syllabus is designed as the teaching and learning proceeds. It focuses on the language learning process and the contributions of the learner to it (Breen 1987: 159). The provided framework is one in which a predesigned content syllabus is publicly analyzed and evaluated by the classroom group, and the content is designed in an on-going way. In other words, this syllabus accepts the evolving nature of competence and adapts as it emerges gradually. In some cases, learners are encouraged to choose for themselves, but with guidance, which ways to follow-through loads of activities and materials, motivated by their own interest. Process syllabus takes in consideration alternative procedures, activities and tasks for the classroom group. It explicitly attends to teaching and learning and particularly the possible interrelationships between subject matter, learning and the potential contributions of a classroom.

7. A learner-led syllabuses

Breen and Candlin (1984) were the first ones to propose the idea of using an approach on how learners learn the language. As the name suggests, emphasis of this syllabus is upon the learner, who is engaged in the implementation of the syllabus design as much as it is possible. By so doing, the syllabus aims at increasing the learner's motivation and interest in the course as well as sharping the skills since the learner considers himself/herself participant in the syllabus design. The critics state that as the direction of the syllabus will be in the hands and responsibility of the learners, a learner-led syllabus will be too complicated to follow, radical, far-reaching and utopian. In addition, the lack of support with course book may cause therefore a lack of aims.

8. A proportional syllabus

This type of syllabus is basically practical and focuses on flexibility and spiral technique of language sequencing leading to the recycling of language. The proportional syllabus tries to develop an overall competence. This syllabus is appropriate for learners who lack exposure to the target language beyond the classroom. More specifically, this syllabus comprises a variety of elements with theme playing chosen by the learners as linking part through the units. At first, the form is of essential value, but later the emphasis will turn towards interactional elements. The shift from form to interaction can occur at any time and is not restricted to a particular level of learner ability. The dominant view in designing a proportional syllabus centers around the premise that a syllabus has to indicate explicitly what will be taught, rather than what will be learned. In closing, the rationale behind designing such a syllabus is to develop a type of syllabus that is dynamic with ample opportunity for feedback and flexibility.

9. A content-based syllabus

This syllabus is intended to design a type of instruction in which the crucial goal is to teach specific information and content using the language that the learners are also learning, Breen, (1984b). Although the subject matter is of primary and vital importance, language learning occurs concurrently with the content learning. The learners are at the same time language students and learners of whatever content and information is being taught. This syllabus can be exemplified by assuming a chemistry class in which chemistry is taught in the language the learners need or want to learn, possibly with linguistic adjustment to make the chemistry more understandable. Content based syllabus is closely related to the learner's subject discipline. The focus of this type of syllabus is content based in orientation as well as text and language-based. It makes use extensively of authentic texts drawn out of professional magazines, newspaper, podcast, TV reports, and so on, keeping in mind the learners' discipline. Therefore if examples are taken from field of Business English, the content of the material in this syllabus might come from finance, marketing, accounting, in English for Environment and Agriculture, the content

of the materials to be used would focus on climate change, soil properties, pollution, intensive farming and so on. In content based syllabus, the content provides the point of departure for the syllabus, is usually derived from some fairly well-defined subject area. This might be other subjects in a school curriculum such as science or social studies, or specialist subject matter relating to an academic or technical field such as economics agriculture, medicine or tourism.

10. A notional/functional syllabus

The notional-functional syllabus is a way syllabus designers use to organize language-learning curriculum, rather than a method or an approach, therefore instruction is not organized in terms of grammatical structure but instead in terms of "notions" and "functions". In this syllabus, a "notion" is a particular context in which the learner engages in, and a "function" is a specific purpose for the learner in a given context. Examples of functions are instances such as suggesting, advising, agreeing, inviting; and notions embrace status, color, age, size, comparison and so on. Notional-functional syllabus considers important the fact thatthe needs of the students have to be explored and analyzed by different types of interaction and communication a learner may be engaged in. Consequently, needs analysis is central to the design of notional-functional syllabuses in order to establish the necessary objectives. Described also as "the semantically-based syllabus" and also referred to as the Situational Syllabus in which the primary unit of organization is a non-linguistic category, namely the situation, it stresses the communicative properties of language where the central concern is the teaching of meaning and the communicative use of patterns. Wilkins (1976) wanted to identify the meanings that learners might need to express (the notions) and the communicative acts they would wish to engage in (the functions). Yalden (1987), also, says that these syllabuses are concerned with functions (e.g. agreeing, denying, persuading …) and notions (e.g. time, concepts …).

The situational aspect of these syllabuses is based on Hornby's situational method of using real activities performed in the classroom to emphasize getting things done rather than language laws.

11. A lexical syllabus

This type of syllabus concentrates on a detailed analysis of selected corpus (general or specific) of language reflecting the discourse of the target language community. Willis (1990, 129-130) points out that "taking lexis as a starting point enabled us to identify the commonest meanings and patterns in English and to offer students a picture which is typical of the way English is used". The syllabus designer is equipped with lists of the most frequently used words accompanied by their meanings and information about their typical grammatical and lexical environments.

Willis' lexical syllabus has foundations on real language. It draws on the COBUILD research which provides an analysis of a corpus of natural language of twenty million words. The COBUILD corpus provides the content of the lexical syllabus, the commonest words and phrases in English and their meanings. Thus, the picture of the language one pictures in designing such a syllabus is quite distinct from what one might present intuitively. In fact, intuition on its own cannot identify the most frequent words and phrases of the language, or even recognize their importance. The proposed lexical syllabus is actually based on a body of research into natural language rather than other pedagogic grammars. The result is to put forward a more complete pedagogic description of the language and a better balanced description as well.

12. A cultural syllabus

Since the early days when cultural syllabus emerged many scholars have tried and given up to give a proper and definite definition on the concept of culture. Seelye (1984:26) refused to define culture, calling it 'a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man'. Stern (1992) introduces 'cultural syllabus' to be incorporated into second/foreign language education in order to have a better understanding of the term culture, and suggests that writers 'have tried to reduce the vast and amorphous nature of the culture concept to manageable proportions by preparing lists of items or by indicating a few broad categories'. An important feature of the CS

Syllabus is that it is skills-oriented (critical reading, comparing and contrasting, ethnographic and research skills). This gives the teacher the freedom to use different topics to practice the skills while at the same time avoids repetition.

Believing in the fact that there is a consensus on the objectives of teaching culture, Stern (1992) indicates that aims should be:

• A research-minded outlook

• The learner's own country

• Knowledge about the target culture

• Affective goals; interest, intellectual curiosity, and empathy.

• Awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture

• Emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use

3-Conclusion

When starting to design and implement a syllabus, there are many essential points to be considered. Flower dew argues that many syllabuses developed by course designers are not based on a particular syllabus, but take into account aspects of two or three different syllabus types. Swan (as cited in Robinson, 1991) argues that the real issue is not which syllabus to choose but more importantly how all the above listed syllabuses are to be integrated into sensible learning programs. Robinson (1991) suggests that all approaches should be simultaneously available, and syllabus designers should try to find the most suitable one when considering a syllabus design in English for Specific Purposes. In addition to the selection of the appropriate syllabus, Robinson (1991) emphasizes that "a judicious consideration of the student's needs and the objectives of the course, together with the institutional bias of the teaching institution should be taken into account".

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