

Unit 4

English language Teaching Syllabuses

Content

1. Content-based syllabuses

1.1. The grammatical syllabus

1.2. The situational syllabus.

1.3. The notional-functional syllabus.

2. Method-based syllabuses

2.1. The procedural syllabus.

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1. Content – Based Syllabuses.

The content – based syllabuses may exemplify differences in content, but they are all united in their objectives: teaching the content. Lists of items have to be learnt whether these are grammatical structures, categories of communicative functions, topics, themes, or communicative and cognitive skills.

1.1. The Grammatical Syllabus.

The grammatical syllabus is based on the view that language is a grammatical system and that learning a language consists of learning that system¹.

¹ It therefore gives a descriptive account of the systematic rules of the language and its sub-system of grammar, lexis, phonology, and morphology.

The grammatical syllabus is also based on a psycholinguistic theory of learning which holds that the task of learning a language is made easier through exposure to one part of the grammatical system at a time¹.

The syllabus represents a developmental route from what is simple in terms of form, structure, or rule towards what is complex (Breen 1987 a). the learner needs to master basic grammar or vocabulary and subsequently adds to what he already know².

However, the grammatical syllabus has been criticised mainly for its restriction on grammatical competence. In this respect, a knowledge of the grammatical system of the language does not meet the need of the learners and therefore demotivates them to learn the language for real communication.

2. The Situational Syllabus.

The situational syllabus came as an alternative to the grammatical syllabus. It is based on the view that language always occurs in a social situation (or a social context) and that the teaching of language should not be isolated from its context or situation³.

1.3. The Notional – Functional Syllabus.

The notional – functional syllabus introduces two elements to syllabus design: the first is a notional or conceptual aspect such as time, space, movement, cause,

¹ The syllabus, therefore, subdivides what is to be learned from units (sentence types – declarative, interrogative, etc.) into smaller units (modality, verb inflections, pronunciation, discourse markers, etc.).

² [The syllabus, therefore, is accumulative in sequence where the learner gradually synthesises what is learned].

³ (e.g. at the bank, at the supermarket, at home).
(see Supplementary No. 3).

and effect, and the second is a functional aspect which describes the intentional or purposive use of language¹.

Functions are clear examples of pieces of 'language content'. Basically, a function is a label attached to a sentence saying what it *does*. But within any such sentence there may be other units of content, which we might call *concepts*, although they are often, confusingly, referred to as *notions*. Examples of these are the concepts of *time, space, quantity*, motion, etc.

In practice, unlike functions, these concepts are closely linked to the structure and lexis of a language. But not entirely. The preposition *in*, for example, is used both to express *time* and *space*: e.g. *in the evening* and *in bed*. We should finally add a very important set of concepts representing the speaker's attitude to what he says. (Wilkins calls this modal meaning.) the sentences:

Our team may win.

Our team will win.

Our team must win.

Represent a scale of *uncertainly-certainly*, and there are many other linguistic forms which are used to express the speaker's position on this scale².

2. Method – based syllabuses.

Method-based syllabuses explore the relationship between the content and method within a syllabus.

2.1. The procedural Syllabus.

The procedural syllabus is based on “a learning centred” approach to language teaching. It is associated with the work of Prabhu in the Bangalore Project in

¹ The language needed to express different functions (requesting, suggesting, promising, describing). (see Supplementary No. 4).

² A part from certainly/ uncertainly, we have concepts such as *obligation* and *intention*. In practice, these categories overlap with communicative functions. (Hubbard et al, 1985).

India (Prabhu, 1987). Prabhu bases his work on the principle that the learning of form is best carried out when attention is paid to meaning¹.

The procedural or task syllabus consists of lists of graded activities based on cognitive tasks which deal with topics of everyday conversation. All the learners need to do is to solve problems and complete their tasks by using English. Thus the focus is on the completion of the task rather than learning the language. However, this task-based teaching will enable the learners, in due course, to learn the grammatical elements of the language².

The procedural syllabus is a task-based syllabus. Tasks are selected and graded in terms of cognitive complexity³.

These tasks are not innovative, but they are claimed to be so in the way the material is used.

- * The teacher and the learners focus on the task rather than the language which is, in any case, given some attention to complete the task.
- * Language errors are only repaired by the teacher who tries to elicit the correct form from the students.
- * No attempt is made to focus on the language and provide a rule of grammar or correction of spelling mistakes⁴.

For each lesson, there are two stages: a pre-task and a task.

¹ In this respect, he shows his dissatisfaction with the structural – oral situational method which prevailed as the pedagogic orthodoxy in the 1960s and which puts particular emphasis on the study of language forms

² It is supposed that the grammatical system of the language will be covered through a meaningful interaction between the teacher and the learners

³ The following example is just one category of a list of some of the tasks set by Prabhu and quoted in White (1988):

5. Maps.

- a. Finding, naming or describing specific locations on a given map.
- b. Constructing/ completing a map from given descriptions/ instructions.
- c. Deciding on the best route from one place to another; giving directions.
- e. Deciding on the best form of transport (given information on bus routes, fares, etc.).
- f. Making decisions on good/ bad siting (e.g. of a new hospital or school). (P. 105)

⁴ Prabhu calls such language repair “incidental correction” as contrasted with “systematic correction”

- * The pre-task provides the teacher with some judgments about the pupils' comprehension of the task.
- * From this, the teacher can break the task down into smaller, more comprehensible, and more manageable units.
- * The task itself should be completed individually¹.
- * There must be a reasonable challenge in the task so that learners do not meet the challenge too easily but with some effort².
- * Task types should be changed after every few lessons for reasons of over familiarity and fatigue.
- * Although collaboration between learners was allowed the learners were not obliged to engage in group intervention³.

3. Conclusion: Which Syllabus?

Above, two major approaches to syllabus design have been discussed: the content – based syllabuses and the method – based syllabuses. It should be made clear that neither one of these two types will necessarily be by itself a suitable syllabus for foreign language learners⁴.

The envisaged syllabus should focus on the provision of communicative activities that stimulate learners' interests and involvement in the discourse and

¹ Prabhu (1987) states the sequence as follows:

The pre-task and task pattern divides a lesson desirably into an initial period of whole-class activity, teacher –direction and oral interaction and a later period of sustained self-dependent effort by learners, sustained reading (or sustained listening, when the task is presented orally by the teacher) and some writing. (p. 55)

² A reasonable task is the one in which approximately half the learners in the class should be successful in carrying it out.

³ Prabhu believes that not all learners like to engage in group work as they may feel humiliated in front of their peers, even though they accept loss of face when it comes to the superiority of their teacher.

⁴ “while the former focuses on learning the system of the language, the latter focuses on the use of the language, and neither of these aims alone is likely to be sufficient for learning a language”. (Hasan, 1988, p. 239).

develop their skills for the negotiation of meaning in genuine interaction. And, of course, a syllabus that combines the best of available syllabuses and gives the ideal balance between correct language forms and their appropriate use in actual communication is much needed.

Supplementary No. 3: The Situational Syllabus

In the situational syllabus, a series, of situations will form the main organising principle, and each situation is associated with a particular activity or task. The following example taken from (Get By in Italian 1981, quoted in White 1988) illustrates some of the organising features involved in a situational – based course for tourists:

Ordering and paying.

Helloes and goodbyes

Ordering a drink

Simple numbers and money.

Shopping around.

Buying an ice-cream

Buying food for a picnic, cheese, bread.

Buying stamps.

Buying a wallet.

Travelling around.

Asking the way to the station, the post office, etc.

Catching a train, tickets and platforms, catching, a bus,

Getting somewhere to stay.

Booking into a hotel.

Getting a place at a composite

Opening items.

A meal and a chat.

Ordering a meal; the bills and toilets.

Meeting people.

The weather.

It is clear that each unit is organised under a general heading, with subheadings for specific activities. A series of typical tourist situations is used with associated activities. Thus, we have shops, restaurants, streets, the station, the post office, and hotels as typical settings with buying things, asking the way and ordering a meal as typical activities with these settings.

Thus, upon identifying a particular situation, say tourism, a language syllabus associated with it can be devised. The grading and sequencing of the syllabus is less clear: the syllabus designer may simply arrange the events according to a chronological sequence based on arriving, staying, departing, etc. Alternatively, he might use a structural grading of the associated language as a guide to the sequencing of situations.

- * The situational syllabus uses materials that give minor attention to grammar, only to the extent that it is helpful to generate similar language patterns in a new situation.
- * The situational materials are based on an aural-oral method: students hear and speak the language before they read and write.

Presentation and practice makes use of:

- * realia, the content of the classroom: books, pencils, etc....
- * the body language of the teacher and learners and other objects.
- * Role-play is encouraged.
- * Students exchange greetings, as for things to be given, and conduct brief conversations.
- * The teacher's book contains suggestions for conducting such teaching practices.

Finally, the situational syllabus has been mainly criticised on the grounds that:

- * It is difficult to predict the situations in which the learner is likely to use the language, and the amount he needs in a particular context.

- * If we include only those words and structures of the language whose use is predictable or typical in a certain situation, we are confining the nature of language to a particular situation.
- * Also spontaneous conversation involves expected elements such as making requests or complaints, agreeing or disagreeing, etc. These features are not determined language functions and can be found in any situation.

Supplementary No. 4: The Notional – Functional Syllabus

The notional – functional syllabus appeared in the early seventies as an alternative to avoid the difficulties of both the grammatical and situational syllabuses. In the 1960's and early 1970's a new branch of linguistics was concerned with the study of language not merely as a phenomenon separable from its use in everyday life, but as a social structure.

Thus, sociolinguists like Hymes (1971) criticised the formal concept of Chomsky's view of linguistic competence. Hymes views a knowledge of language as comprising, in addition to linguistic competence, a knowledge of how to use language in appropriate ways to achieve particular purposes.

At the same time as these changes in linguistics, philosophers of language began to explore the notion of Speech Acts and the hidden meanings of people's utterances. Interest shifted from the use of language to the "force" or "value" that we intend to convey in our utterances. (Levinson, 1983). Thus, a knowledge of meaning or semantics was necessary in addition to the linguistic code of the language

A major development in linguistics has been to incorporate interpersonal and ideational knowledge with linguistic or textual knowledge and how these interrelate when we put language to everyday use (Halliday, 1970).

This brief sketchy view of linguistic development presented here serves to locate the theoretical roots of the communicative approach to language teaching. One manifestation of this approach is the notional – functional syllabus.