

ESL Syllabus Design: Its Impact on the Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

One of the areas which seemingly remains constant in this ever changing world is the approach to second language syllabus design in India. Invariably, majority of the Arts and Science Colleges follow outdated syllabi which hardly address the changing needs of the students. Not only do the syllabi fail to accommodate the expectations of the students, but also handicap those teachers who want to help students learn the target language. Incompatibility in terms of input provided and communication skills required by the end-users is increasingly felt in today's context since most of the vernacular medium students complete their studies with very little language skills, and are unable to perform the basic functions with the target language. This paper, therefore, attempts to look critically at the approach to English language syllabus design in India and studies the impact of such approach on the teaching-learning process.

Key words: Functional-notional, learner-generated, lexical, integrated, interlanguage, teacher-plausibility.

Introduction

Change is vital for those who welcome challenge and keep themselves relevant in this ever-changing world. In India, proactive educational institutions have scaled greater heights by constantly amending their syllabi to meet the demands of changing times. The amendments are akin to the felt-need of the students who undergo the programme. The personality traits and employability skills of the students who pass out of these institutions bear testimony to the kind of training imparted. This is one end of the continuum and regrettably only a few institutions come under this category. Contrarily, on the other end, change is inevitable for those institutions which want to stay away from it because if they do not change they would become irrelevant and dated. Change, in such institutions, bechances almost unwillingly though. Therefore, to survive, one must change with time either willingly or unwillingly; or else perish with time - forever unwillingly.

Another dimension to change is also popular and most of the educational institutions may be found on this side of the story. Here change is perceived as a superficial factor - change with regard to syllabus design and implementation, therefore, happens only at the surface level; at the deeper level the syllabus remains just the same.

Understandably, no one acknowledges that such practice exists. This is strange yet real side of the story where little effort is needed to face change, for most of the changes effected are cosmetic and in the name of change one happens to see the old wine not in new but new-looking bottles. As a result, students become silent sufferers; and majority of the students are sufferers since most of the institutions today have not updated the General English syllabi based on recent theoretical developments and learning needs of the students.

Let us first briefly discuss a few important definitions of syllabus. Since every syllabus has a unique learning focus, reviewing the evolution of all such foci is beyond the scope of this paper. We shall, therefore, present some important definitions of syllabus and follow it up with a brief description of the uniqueness of the prominent syllabi ELT's history has witnessed so far.

Definition of a Syllabus

We understand that the number of syllabus types has increased manifold over the last four decades especially after the inception of the communicative approach to language teaching. There are as many definitions as there are syllabus types and let us look at a few important ones. To begin with, Breen (1984) defines syllabus as “a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning (p. 47).” Candlin (1984) considers it as “the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners (p. 30).” Sinclair and Renouf have (1988) given a relatively elaborate definition which is as follows:

set of headings indicating items which have been selected, by a language planner or materials writer, to be covered in a particular part of the curriculum or in a course series. Its content is usually identified in terms of language elements and linguistic or behavioural skills. Sometimes there is a methodology built into it, although syllabus and methodology are in principle distinct. (p. 141)

As far as Widdowson (1990) is concerned, a syllabus is “the specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners (p. 127).” Nunan (1993) has defined it as a “selection and grading of content” (p. 8); and for Dubin and Olshtain (1997) it is “a more detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning elements which translates the philosophy of the curriculum into a series of planned steps leading towards more narrowly defined objectives at each level (p. 28).”

Thus we understand that syllabus is a precise time bound plan which includes specifications set forth by the stakeholders for a particular set of students. Nonetheless,

the specifications of what should go into a syllabus have changed over the years depending on the popular perceptions of the time. Any major change in specification has resulted in the birth of a new syllabus type.

Types of syllabus

Let us now look at the bases of some prominent syllabus types. *Structural syllabus*, which is said to be the first syllabus to have a strong research base, has its focus on grammatical structures which are presented in a graded manner (Brown, 1995); *situational syllabus* accounts for the language demands of the situations most likely to be encountered by the students (White, 1988); *functional-notional syllabus*, on the one hand, looks at language through functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, requesting, ordering etc, and on the other hand, focuses on notions like age, colour, time etc as language input (Wilkins, 1976); *procedural syllabus* provides tasks to help students focus primarily on meaning (and not on form) during communicative attempts (Prabhu, 1987); *learner-generated syllabus* evolves with the programme where the students in negotiation with the teacher arrive at a syllabus to suit their needs (Candlin 1984); *lexical syllabus* presents lexis as a starting point to identify common meanings and patterns in English (Willis 1990); *cultural syllabus* advocates the use of students' own culture and tries to sensitise students on the difference between the native and target culture (stern 1992); *task-based syllabus* has its thrust on language tasks (Long and Crookes, 1992) and *integrated syllabus* (Cunningsworth, 1984) calls for an integration of all relevant-cum-feasible qualities of the available syllabi.

It is important to point out at this juncture that through this brief account of the central principles of syllabus design since audio-lingual method, we understand that the focus, on the one hand, has shifted from structure to meaning, and on the other hand, from expert-led to student-led. This shift has not always been linear. According to Graves (2000) any change depends on factors such as the course content, goals and objectives, teacher's past experience, students' needs, teacher-beliefs and understandings, the method or text and the context. All these factors are contextual and thus subject to change depending on the situation. Given the limited empirical evidence of any particular syllabus type working better than the others (Brown, 1995) we need to design our syllabus towards a specific group of students. Thus syllabus design does not mean selecting a particular syllabus type but identifying what of the available syllabi will work with the students. Every syllabus has its own merits and demerits which are highly subjective. In other words, a feature of a syllabus considered meritorious by one group of teachers may be looked at as a negative quality by another group. Likewise, one aspect of a syllabus may suit a particular context, whereas the same may be deemed unfit in a different setting. Therefore, before deciding on a syllabus, one must take into account all the potential factors that may affect teaching

and learning. This is solvable provided we adopt an integrated syllabus. In this regard, Richards (2001) has observed, “In most courses there will generally be a number of different syllabus strands, such as *grammar* linked to *skills* and *texts*, *tasks* linked to *topics* and *functions*, or *skills* linked to *topics* and *texts*” (p. 164).

Syllabus Design at the Tertiary Level

Syllabus design is a vibrant field which has widened with time. Nonetheless, in India, the understanding of a syllabus is a strange phenomenon. In fact, framing of a syllabus is mostly dictated by the textbooks available with the publishers. Often, the content page of the textbook/s is duplicated as a GE syllabus. In order to verify this, we studied the syllabi of three universities and five autonomous colleges between 2000 and 2010. Dreadfully, for nearly a decade and after at least three revisions effected one gets to see a list of poems, short stories, essays, abridged novels and one-act plays adorning the pages of the GE syllabi. During revisions only the genres have changed repeatedly for no obvious reason. The texts are replaced because they have surprisingly become old, whereas, the replaced texts have hardly proven to be different from the previous texts in any aspect: be it semantic variation, linguistic complexity, lexical diversity or thematic relevance. To use Narula’s (1999) words “The curriculum chosen for English language teaching in India has hardly undergone any change, except in promoting and shuffling text (p. 119).” Such a comment is not new to English language teaching in India. Venkatasubramanian’s (1978) comment, though made three decades ago, clearly summarises the current state of syllabus design in India:

We have clearly established in India that one of the main causes for stagnation and repetition at all levels of education system is the nature of the curriculum and the syllabus which does not correspond to the interest and aptitudes of the individual student; and the interests of even society at large. (p. 73)

Along with this list of important literary works, a few grammar items are also presented in equally distributed units. We must remember, however, that these grammar items are meant to be taught for the most part to fill-in blanks given in the exercises and rarely as a means to meet communicative ends.

With such an approach dominating ELT scenario, textbooks become more powerful than the teachers. Teacher-autonomy and student-interest are sidelined by experts who perceive syllabus as a content of works to be learnt and not as a list of skills and functions to be acquired by the students through enjoyable and meticulous practice. As a result, teaching becomes a burden to the teachers and learning becomes extraneous to the students.

Impact on Teaching

The content of most of the GE syllabi of the universities and autonomous colleges is far removed from not only the recent second language theories but also the needs of the students. As mentioned elsewhere, we find that the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Hardy, Shelley and other eminent writers occupy the slots meant for language-related elements, functions and skills. Using literature to teach language skills though well received by experts has not been well realised in a syllabus which treats texts as mere content and not as a vehicle to teach language as communication, that is, using literature to teach English is relevant, interesting and economical but using it as the content of syllabus misleads the teacher into using literature as content and not as a material essentially meant to teach language for communicative purposes.

Consequently, we stumble upon irrelevant questions in the examinations like ‘What is the king’s name?’, ‘When did he marry her?’ and so on” These questions do not test the communicative skills whatsoever of the students. Instead, they merely test students’ memory. Hence teachers struggle to ‘cover portions’ which in our case are poems, plays, short stories, essays and grammar items; and in the process lose sight of the actual need of the students.

After an informal interview with 38 college teachers, we could find a pattern of teaching GE students. It is more likely that a teacher engages classes in the following manner:

1. Begin with a thematic introduction to the lesson.
2. Read out or ask the students to read the text aloud, mostly paragraph/stanza wise and randomly correct those words mispronounced.
3. Explain/interpret the text word-for-word depending on the length of the lesson. For example, a poem is interpreted extensively whereas an abridged novel is summarised chapter wise owing to its excessive length.
4. Discover the figures of speech and state their significance.
5. Give a quick monolingual/and bilingual sum up of the lesson depending on the proficiency level of the students.
6. Ask comprehension questions which mostly are factual in nature. These questions are normally found at the end of every lesson or at the end of the book.
7. Finish it up by dictating a summary in the disguise of an essay so that the students reproduce the same - escaping genuine thinking while taking tests/examinations.

The order mentioned above varies slightly from teacher to teacher but the stages arguably remain the same. Some teachers, trying to innovate, give projects, conduct debates and role plays at the end or in between these seven stages. Nonetheless, these

'innovations' lack focus and end up as any other attempt which is general and not tuned to enhance specific assessable language-related skills.

This in no way qualifies to be a fruitful procedure in a teaching-learning context, that too, at the tertiary level. However, the stages mentioned above are popular because the syllabus indirectly encourages such practises. One may ask "If one believes that students can be trained to use language to communicate in real settings, why not the teacher do so in the current set up?" Unfortunately, it is an easy question to ask but a difficult one to face since the syllabus is 'packed' in such a way that a teacher cannot carry any other load than what is already 'stuffed' in the syllabus.

We know that teachers are the ones who serve as via medium between what is conceived by the experts and what is learnt by the students. Becher and Maclure (1978) have said "the work of curriculum development is not completed till it has actually penetrated the classroom and influenced what goes on between individual teachers and individual learners (p. 13)." So, when a syllabus does not give space for creative freedom of the teachers, like what Nagraj (1989) has observed "..., the syllabus controls the teacher and the taught to a greater extent" (p. 8). This will only have adverse effects on teaching practices. The impact primarily would be attitudinal. In Apple and Teitelbaum's (1978) words it may be said "Instead of professional teachers who care greatly about what they do and why they do it, we may have alienated executors of someone else's plans (p. 180)."

If the teachers' expertise is not cared for, they will remain alienated. This alienation must end and there are two ways to end this. Firstly, give considerable freedom to the teachers to decide on what to teach; and secondly, incorporate the felt-need of the students in the syllabus. Of course, teachers have their own way of going about teaching despite the control of the syllabus. The thought of examinations that hardly tests the language skills of the learners, however, comes quite often in their way. What matters ultimately is the score students get in the examinations. To bridge the gap between the syllabus, teaching and examinations is quite remote a chance in the current scenario. It could be possible if all these three areas are driven by the needs of the students. Therefore, it is crucial to doctor the syllabus to remedy student-needs. This would make teaching more challenging and distinct, along with teachers taking more responsibility in the classroom procedures.

Impact on Learning

Where there is an irrelevant syllabus, there seems to be a negative attitude towards learning English among the students. Despite the fact that the present generation is very much aware of their language needs, they dislike L2 classes primarily because of the irrelevance of the syllabus and the teaching method influenced by such syllabus. This, in

fact, is one of the reasons why students especially the vernacular medium fail in large numbers in English language exams.

Students often attend GE classes rather reluctantly since they feel that there is nothing substantial the teacher has to offer other than narrating some stories and asking them to fill-in some blanks. At times the settings of these stories are alien and the characters primitive. Therefore, students hardly take these classes seriously since what is taught has nothing to offer to the development of their skills. Apart from this, when the teacher deals with grammar, for students it is once again, as Gupta (2004) has observed “the same teacher-centred, lecture-based, and exam-centric dull procedure” (p. 266). Students fill-in the blanks by choosing the appropriate choice and by changing the form of the given choice and so on: without knowing its relevance in communicative situations. Thus, classrooms remain a monologue where the teachers showcase their dramatic monologue and students pretend to listen to the monologue endlessly.

Students should not be considered a ‘clean slate’ since they have experiences of their own and they have the inter-language which they want to enhance further. Prabhu (1989) has believed that “Learning depends not just on what inputs are made available to the learner in the form of materials, but, equally, on what the learner brings to bear on those inputs, which can perhaps be called the learners’ investment (p. 66).” The texts prescribed in the syllabus are on the one hand difficult to read and on the other deal with some remote themes. There is no research based vocabulary input in these texts and hence after many years of reading and listening to English, students are unable to comprehend a text and fluently respond to any speaker. The current syllabus, therefore, expects students to remain unwilling attendees, passively going through irrelevant lessons, mindlessly spending time in the classroom only to exhibit their competence in the paper-and-pencil tests conducted in the name of testing language proficiency.

Implications for Syllabus Design

Ideally, a General English (GE) syllabus ought to guide the teachers and the students along the stated objectives which are relevant, useful, creative and feasible. In the post-method era, the choice of one syllabus or method is not a matter of concern, but ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ we intend to offer language skills to the students are crucial. If the intention is invalid, no method can be effective; and validity is determined by the utility value of the objectives. If the objectives are general or irrelevant, it may only mislead everyone involved in the production, execution and reception of the syllabus. It is everyone’s responsibility to impart relevant education to the students. As Becher and Maclure (1978) have put it, “We try as a society to indicate to the professionals the human

values, the social attitudes, the cultural traditions, the range of skills we wish them to foster in the young people we entrust to their charge (p. 47).”

The first and foremost obligation of any syllabus designer is to look into the academic and career needs of the students for whom the very institutions exist. Be it listening to lectures, or speaking to meet academic requirements, study skills or any other skill that the student may require professionally should be given prior importance. Language skills, more importantly, should be elaborated on with the corresponding subsidiaries in order to make the syllabus more clear and explicit to the teachers and the students.

The absence of a well-researched credible Basic Academic Word List for our students reveals the plight of second language education in India. Thornbury (2002) has been of the opinion that with a core of 2000 high frequency words, with 50 words a week, students can reach a good vocabulary base in about one academic year.

In addition, adequate references can be provided to the teachers in order to adapt the materials and tasks to suit their teaching contexts. This enables the teachers and the taught to decide the type of texts and activities to be used in their classroom. In fact, anything under the sun can be used as teaching material, provided the relevant skills and the related functions are focused on. This would, to some extent, guarantee that, it is not the content, such as, a story or a poem that the teachers/students care about, but the skills they got to teach/acquire that would matter the most to them. Teacher-autonomy is another important issue a syllabus needs to address. As we know, teachers are the practitioners of any syllabus. Hence enough creative space should be embedded in the syllabus to accommodate what Prabhu (1990) has termed “the teachers’ sense of plausibility”, for every teacher is unique in his or her own way.

Conclusion

Framing an effective syllabus to equip students academically and vocationally is imperative in today’s context. Institutions which cater to the student-needs and conceive their syllabi ought to give a genuine research thrust prior to designing a syllabus, so that, the teachers impart skills effectively.

In addition, to be effective, the experts and the teachers should change with time - embracing a student-centred approach to syllabus design which primarily takes care of the academic needs of the students. It would be befitting to quote Hargreaves (1999), who has said “The rules of the world are changing. It is time for the rules of teaching and teachers’ work to change with them (p. 262).” The rules of world changes for everyone and the experts who design syllabus are no exception. One cannot forever turn deaf ear to student-needs. The experts have to keep their ears attentive enough to listen to the long-pending voices of the students; and thus allow the teachers to change their approach to teaching

and help the students have meaningful experiences in the language classrooms. To conclude, it is not *what we know* should dictate syllabus design but *what the students ought to acquire* must get a nod in the syllabus - only then can a syllabus remain meaningful and relevant in this fast-changing era.

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