

The Proportional Syllabus: A Better Alternative to the Existing Syllabus Types in Language Curriculum Design in EFL Contexts

¹Saeid Najafi Sarem*, ²Hadi Hamidi

Department of English, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

¹s_najafisarem@yahoo.com

²hamidi_tefl@yahoo.com

Abstract: Due to the emergence of new approaches and theories, a lot of changes have occurred in all aspects of language teaching and learning. Language syllabus as an important part of each teaching methodology has not been an exception and has undergone the same changes through the processes of language curriculum development and syllabus design. Based on learners' needs and course objectives essential to require, a variety of language syllabus types have been devised in every specific point of time. However, generally speaking, two extremes seem remarkable in this respect, which draw a dividing line between various syllabus types. At one end, there are Type A product-oriented synthetic syllabuses which focus on *what* to be learned in the language, whereas in the other end there are Type B process-oriented analytic syllabi which operate in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and consequently concentrate on *how* a second language should be learned. In addition to these two general categories, a third type of syllabus, known as the proportional syllabus, emerged in 1980s which possessed a hybrid dynamic nature merging different features of the previous syllabus types. The current article attempts to first take a short look at the syllabuses involved in these two extremes, and second focuses on the features and advantages of the proportional syllabus over the previous ones. Finally, the implications and applications of applying the proportional syllabus will be discussed both for syllabus designers and language teachers.

Keywords: Type A Syllabi, Product-Oriented Synthetic Syllabi, Type B Syllabi, Process-Oriented Syllabi, Proportional Syllabus

Introduction

The history of second language learning has seen the rise and fall of many approaches to language teaching. At every specific point of time, the relevant ruling paradigm has led to a specific teaching methodology each with its own sets of principles, different theoretical backgrounds, different teacher and learner roles, as well as a certain type of syllabus influencing the teaching practices as well as the learning outcomes. Language syllabus, as an integral part of each teaching method is devised with meticulous scrutiny through the process of syllabus design and curriculum development by either syllabus designers or language teachers. According to Munby (1987), syllabus design is seen as "a matter of specifying the content that needs to be taught and then organizing it into a teaching syllabus of appropriate learning units." To gain the maximum benefits of syllabus in a limited time, it is imperative that syllabus must be designed taking into

account the learners 'needs and objectives, essential to require.

A number of definitions have been proposed for the term syllabus by different scholars. In Wilkins' (1981) words, syllabuses are "specifications of the content of language teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering with the aim of making teaching and learning a more effective process." According to Breen (1984) a syllabus can also be seen as "a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning". Widdowson (1990, p. 127) interprets a syllabus as "the specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners . . . a syllabus specification, then, is concerned with both the selection and the ordering of what is to be taught". Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 80) define *syllabus* at its simplest level "as a statement of what is to be learnt". They further add that it reflects of language and linguistic performance. Yalden (1987, p. 87)

also refers to syllabus as a "summary of the content to which learners will be exposed". Candlin (1984) suggests a different perspective implying that syllabuses are "social constructions, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners...They are concerned with 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." Finally, in simple words, a language teaching syllabus involves the combination of subject matter (what to teach) and linguistic matter (how to teach). It actually performs as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be accomplished.

Knowing the concept of syllabus, as was mentioned earlier, depending on many factors including the learner's needs and the course objectives, different types of syllabuses have been proposed. Wilkins (1976) separates language syllabi into product-oriented syllabuses also known as the *synthetic approach* and process-oriented syllabuses or the *analytic approach*. Product-oriented syllabuses emphasize the product of language learning and are prone to intervention from an authority. In these syllabuses different parts of language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure has been built up . . . At any one time the learner is being exposed to a deliberately limited sample of language (Wilkins, 1976, p. 2). These syllabuses, according to Rabbini (2002), focus on what the learners will know as a result at the end of instruction session. The grammatical, lexical, situational and notional-functional are the examples of product-oriented syllabus. On the other hand, analytic, process-oriented syllabi operate in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes (Wilkins, 1976, p. 13). These syllabuses, according to Rabbini (2002) developed as a result of a sense of failure in product-oriented courses to enhance communicative language skills. It is a process rather than a product. That is, focus is not on what the student will have accomplished on completion of the program, but on the specification of learning tasks and activities that s/he will undertake during the course. Procedural, process and task syllabuses are examples of analytic, process-oriented syllabuses.

From another perspective, White (1988, pp. 44-47) explains that all current syllabi fall under two categories, which he calls *Type A* and *Type B* syllabi. *Type A* syllabi deal with *what* should be learned in a second language classroom. The emphasis is upon subject and content. Course objectives are determined weeks ahead of the class. The teacher is the authority and main resource person for the students. The teacher decides what items the students must master and how they will be evaluated. What is done in class is external to the learner and interventionist. In other words, things are done *to* the learner. *Type B* syllabi consider the question of *how* a second language should be learned. The emphasis is upon the learning process. Objectives are decided during the course and are based

upon the needs of the learners. The teacher and students work together with the study focus and testing format negotiable. What happens in class is internal to the learner. Things are done *with* the learner. White categorizes content or skills-based syllabi as *type A* and methods-based syllabi as *type B* (White, 1988, pp. 44-47). Comparing White's classification of syllabus types with Welkin's, one can understand that *Type A* syllabuses are equivalent to *Product-oriented synthetic* syllabi, and *Type B* syllabuses stand for *Process-oriented analytic* syllabi.

Considering the above points into account, it seems obvious that in terms of syllabus design the EFL academic community has confronted with two extremes. At one extreme the product-oriented syllabuses are noticeable from among which before the 1970's, structural syllabi based upon grammatical form were prevalent throughout the world. At the other extreme, the process-oriented syllabuses are prominent among which the procedural, task syllabuses have occupied a firm position. Gradually, a move took place away from structural syllabi towards a focus on the communicative aspects of the language and on learner autonomy. This trend reached its climax in the early 1990's. However, it appears that the pendulum of syllabus design has not preoccupied a fixed position and has fluctuated from one extreme to another periodically swinging back towards a focus on form and structure.

Long and Crookes (1993, p. 10) have noted the astounding diversity of syllabus types falling between these two extremes that are presently available to us: communicative, content-based, functional, lexical, notional, procedural, process, situational, skills, structural, task-based, and topical syllabi. However, contrary to the either-or nature of product-process oriented syllabuses, Yalden (1987) has proposed a hybrid dynamic type of syllabus known as proportional syllabus. In order to have a better grasp of the proportional syllabus and compare it with other types of syllabi, in what follows, we will turn our focus to proportional syllabus, elaborating on its features and its advantages in comparison to other forms of syllabi.

Proportional Syllabus

Wilkins (1976, p. 2) described analytic and synthetic syllabi as proportional. Syllabi that bolster second language curricula are never completely analytic or synthetic in nature. The three principles which can inform language syllabus design, according to Yalden (1987), are (1) a view of how language is *learned*, which could result in a structure-based syllabus; (2) a view of how language is *acquired*, which would result in a process-based syllabus; and (3) a view of how language is *used*, which would result in a function-based syllabus. By integrating all three, Yalden proposes a proportional syllabus, with a semantic-grammatical organizational base, a linguistic component based on language functions, and themes based on learners' interests. In the early stages of language learning, one might place more emphasis on structure, before moving on

to functions and then using tasks or topics to apply and creatively use the language.

According to Yalden (1983), a proportional syllabus, which is illustrated in Figure 1. below, comprises a blend of structural and functional elements. In Yalden's proportional syllabus the focus shifts from linguistic form to communicative function as the programme progresses. There is an initial 'structural phase' which concentrates on formal and ideational meaning. 'Communicative phases' follow, in which functional, discourse and rhetorical components are added. There is a final 'specialized phase' in which specialized content and surface features of the language are emphasized.

The proportional syllabus, according to Yalden (1987), basically attempts to develop an "overall competence". It consists of a number of elements with theme playing a linking role through the units. This theme is designated by the learners. It is expected initially that form will be of central value, but later, the focus will turn towards interactional components; the syllabus is designed to be dynamic, not static, with ample opportunity for feedback and flexibility (Yalden, 1987, p. 100).

The shift from form to interaction can occur at any time and is not limited to a particular stratum of learner ability. As Yalden (1987) observes, it is important for a syllabus to indicate explicitly what will be taught, "not what will be learned".

This practical approach, based on Rabbini (2002), with its focus on flexibility and spiral method of language sequencing leading to the recycling of language, seems relevant for learners who lack exposure to the target language beyond the classroom.

The benefits of a proportional syllabus, according to Yalden (1983), are that it overcomes "the problem of reconciling functional and structural demands...[and] offers a close interweaving of structural and non-structural, systematic and non-systematic elements over time" (p. 81). In other words, a proportional syllabus assumes a mid-way position between the diametric extremes mentioned by White (1988). This is illustrated by options one and three in Table 1 below:

Figure 1: The proportional syllabus (White, 1988: 81)

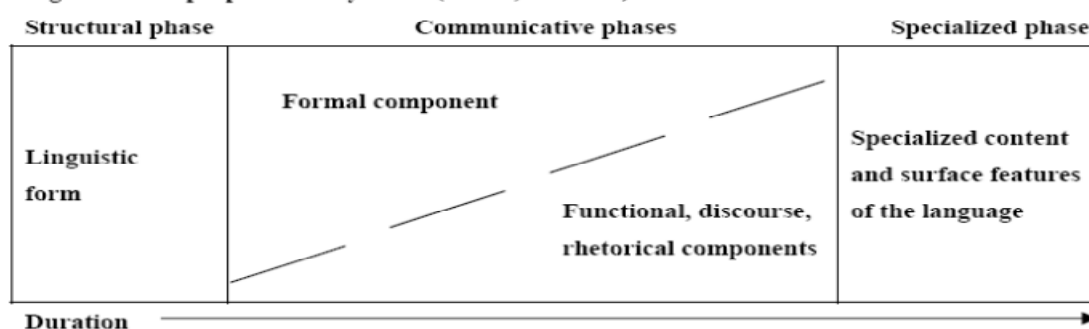


Table 1: Procedural, Proportional and Structural Syllabi

Procedural	Proportional	Structural
Focus on Meaning	Focus on Meaning and Form	Focus on Form
TBL Methodology	CLT Methodology	GT Methodology

Table 2. Allen's (1984) variable focus syllabus

Structure/Function	Function/Skills	Task/Theme
Great emphasis on structure and functions, Introduction of learning strategies and techniques	Targeting specific functions, Application through task-based and problem-solving activities	Remedial structural work, Task-based syllabus, focus on learning processes and strategies to encourage creative language use
Elementary levels	Pre-Intermediate Levels	Intermediate and above

In addition, a proportional syllabus allows for classroom content to be dependent upon either the length of time that learners have been studying, or upon their special needs.

Similar to Yalden's proportional syllabus, Allen (1984) has devised a syllabus named *variable focus syllabus* which accentuates the importance of using a hybrid type of syllabus by language teachers in their classrooms. To mention briefly, Allen's formulation of the variable focus syllabus consists of three components: structural, functional and experiential. The syllabus includes all levels all the time, but the emphasis changes at different stages of learning. Allen's (1984) variable focus syllabus is presented in table 2. above.

The advantages of this mixed-focus model are summed up by Yalden (1987, p. 120) when she states that "it would seem to allow the syllabus designer the most freedom to respond to changing or newly perceived needs in the learners, and at the same time provides a framework for the teacher who may not be able or willing to go fully communicative. It provides the experienced teacher with a framework that allows for choice in how to implement the syllabus, and with further development can create space for learner-teacher negotiation in real time communication in the classroom (Finney, 2002, p. 7).

Concluding Remarks

As was found through this paper, the field of curriculum development and syllabus design as an important aspect of language education in general and teaching methodology in specific has had a dynamic nature leading to the emergence of many syllabus types. The main elements inflectional in designing various syllabuses, along with the dominant theoretical approaches in the field, were shown to be learner needs and course objectives. Therefore, as was mentioned earlier, two broad categories of syllabuses referred to in different terms were coined by different scholars. Fundamentally, Wilkins (1976) categorized various syllabus types under the two extremes of product-oriented synthetic syllabi and process-oriented analytic syllabi. Later, White (1988) put them under the names of Type A and Type B syllabuses. Also, recently, some other scholars including Hasan (2007) has equalized Type A product-oriented synthetic syllabuses to content-based and Type B process-oriented analytics syllabuses to method-based syllabi. In general, it was shown that in the first group of syllabi knowledge of the subject matter or what to be taught was the main focus of teaching, while in the latter the communication and language in use was primary.

White (1988, cited in Hasan, 2007, p. 58) recognizes that the choice of a syllabus will be influenced by the policy of the educational system rather than principle. In other words, decisions about a syllabus will depend on the values and aims of the language system itself rather than on purely theoretical grounds. These aims may be of two kinds: to acquire knowledge of the language and to acquire the ability to use the language. These are different aims

which require different designs and procedures. If the aim is to teach the language system, the grammatical or notional syllabuses will be appropriate. If, however, the aim is to develop the process of using the language, the process or Task-based syllabus will be preferred.

However, as Hasan (2007) mentions a choice of a syllabus cannot be based on a purely theoretical basis and general aims. Teaching methods based only on what we might loosely call theoretical grounds are not valid; the failure of audiolingualism which is based on linguistic and psychological theory is a case in point here. Indeed, practice in the classroom can run contrary to any predictions based on evidence of theoretical grounds. Thus, a hybrid syllabus based on both theoretical and practical considerations will probably result in a compromise which satisfies the needs of most language learners. From this, it follows that a syllabus designed in the light of practical classroom work must concern itself with "fluency" to a considerable extent. It must also concern itself with "accuracy", though this is perhaps of less importance, as it is believed that learners develop their understanding of the grammatical system of the language through communication. (Hasan, 2007, p. 59)

Hadley (1988, p. 111) has also approved of applying a hybrid syllabus by teachers in the classroom. He says that considering different types of syllabi in relation to the realities of the classroom, in the end, a hybrid syllabus will probably result, not simply because of theoretical considerations, but because, in the day-to-day world of teaching, this will be the compromise which satisfies most interest groups, and I personally would find it difficult to argue against such a pragmatic solution.

Furthermore, as a main advantage proposed by Rabbini (2002), proportional syllabus with its spiral method of language sequencing leading to the recycling of language appeared to be the most appropriate for learners who lack exposure to the target language beyond the classroom. This feature of proportional syllabus seems to make it a good alternative of syllabus design in EFL countries including our country Iran in which the exposure to the target language is rare in naturalistic settings and it is merely limited to classroom contexts and private institutes practicing English language. Also, in EFL settings due to the lack of teachers who are communicatively competent, applying a hybrid proportional syllabus seems to be an appropriate option providing the teachers with conditions to conduct a teacher-learner negotiation and choosing how to implement the syllabus.

In fact, since in a proportional syllabus teachers are free to opt for whatever choice they feel appropriate to their students' needs and proficiency, it can be looked upon as an eclectic model providing teachers with a variety of the alternatives to implement in their classrooms. Martin (1997, p. 4) adds that an eclectic approach is not only common sense, it is A . . . the best available choice since variety is the spice of language." Ultimately an eclectic approach to syllabus design is probably the most logical, but only if it is

an *informed* choice. One cannot use the term “eclectic” as a pretty façade for unprofessionalism.

Finally, it can be seen that any syllabus design, if taken to extremes, will have a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Whatever position language teachers take, they will need to accept the pedagogic consequences of their decision.

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Vitae

Saeid Najafi Sarem is a Ph.D student of TEFL in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research branch, Tehran, Iran. He is the head of Sharif Language Institute in Asadabad, Hamedan, and also teaches in Azad, Payamnoor, and State universities in Hamedan. He is interested in Teaching Methodology and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies and has presented many articles in different national and international seminars and conferences. He has got some publications in different national and international journals as well.

Hadi Hamidi, has been teaching English for about 8 years at different institutes. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research branch, Tehran, Iran. He has carried out a number of researches, translated a couple of articles, and presented a number of papers in different conferences and seminars inside the country. His areas of interest include CALL, ESP and Language Assessment