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## Critical review of approaches to foreign language syllabus design: task-based Syllabus (a shortcut)

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### Abstract

The syllabus which is the heart of any program in teaching and learning is classified according to the units of analysis in their designs in language courses (Long & Crooks, 1992; Rahimpour, 2010; Dadashpour, 2011; Salimi & Dadashpour in press). These units of analysis are selected on the basis of the views on the nature of language and language learning (Nunan, 1987). The main purpose of the present paper is to critically review all approaches to foreign language syllabus design with reference to problems regarding the syllabi in EFL contexts and also discussing the problems in relation to language pedagogy in EFL context. Having done this, the paper will offer task-based approach to language teaching and syllabus design as the solution to methodology and design problems in all EFL contexts. The paper carries significant theoretical and practical implications for syllabus and material developers, language teachers, educationalists, and teacher education. It is also of a particular relevance for foreign language education.

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### 1. Introduction

The main purpose the paper is to familiarize material developers and syllabus designers with the theoretical and practical issues as well as current views in the scope of syllabus design. Then the classification and types of syllabus which are of particular relevance for foreign language education and syllabus design as well as the problems regarding the educational system and measurement with the proposed solutions will be presented.

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## 2. Background

### 2.1. *Current Schools on Syllabus/Curriculum*

According to Rahimpour (2010), there are three important views on the scope of syllabus design. According to Stern (1984) in Rahimpour (2010), the first trend is represented by Candlin & Breen, which is called "Lancaster School". Stern (1984, p: 7) argues that:

This school of thought has strongly reacted against the notion of a fixed syllabus which can be planned, preordained, and imposed on teachers and learners. For this group, it is not a choice between structure and functional syllabus. The principle of any fixed inventory of language items, such as the Council of Europe syllabus, is unacceptable to them. They regard the syllabus as open and negotiable.

The second school of thought which is represented by Widdowson & Brumfit in Rahimpour (2010) is called 'London School'. According to this school:

The Lancaster School is too extreme and unrealistic. They are challenged by it; they react against it; they certainly do not accept it as their own. They put forward what they would consider an alternative and more realistic approach (Stern, 1984:p.8).

This school of thought rejected the extremist and unrealistic nature of claims made by Lancaster School. However, this school believes also in the idea of freedom of teacher in syllabus design. Brumfit as well as Widdowson argue that a curriculum and syllabus is a public statement serving all kinds of practical purposes. They believe that a syllabus must be based on the concept of language, language learning, and language use as opposed to Lancaster School's freedom and constraints.

The third school of thought in syllabus design Yalden's Reformulation which is called Toronto School. This school is a bridge (Rahimpour, 2010) between London and Lancaster Schools. As the representors of this school, Allen & Yalden identify the theoretical basis of the syllabus content. Yalden proposes that the learner may have an input in making curriculum. This school is primarily concerned with the question of the learners' role in syllabus development. The main concern of this school is a question of constructing a theoretically sound and practically useful curriculum.

### 2. 2. *Classifying Syllabus Design*

#### 2. 2.1. *Synthetic vs. Analytic Syllabus*

The syllabus which is the heart of any program in language teaching and learning is classified according to the units of analysis in their designs (Long & Crookes, 1992; Rahimpour, 2008). Traditional approaches to syllabus design have been created on such units of analysis as words, grammatical structures, notions and functions. Such syllabuses are called synthetic (Wilkins, 1976, p: 2). Wilkins in Nunan defines 'synthetic' syllabus as:

A synthetic language teaching strategy is the one in which the different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built (Wilkins, 1976, p: 2).

Therefore, it is the learners' responsibility to synthesize the different bits of information about L2 grammar into meaningful utterances. The other approach is 'analytic' syllabus. An analytic presents the target language whole chunks at a time, in which the learner is provided with a variety of forms that expresses a given content or meaning.

Then, the learners' duty to analyze the relations between the structure and the corresponding communicative content. Nunan (1987, p: 28) defines 'analytic syllabus' as follows:

Analytic syllabi are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning the language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes.

In this type of syllabus, according to Nunan (1987), the starting point for syllabus design is not the grammatical system of the language, but the function for which language is used.

### 2.3. Type A and Type B Syllabi

Another classification which is closely related to the previous one is White's (1988) classification of type A and type B syllabi. Type A syllabus focuses on WHAT is to be learned. They are interventionist in that someone presents the language to be taught, dividing it up into small pieces, and determining the learning objectives in advance of any consideration of who the learner is and how the languages are learned. They are external to the learner, other-directed, and determined by the authority. Type B syllabus, however; focuses on HOW the language is to be learned. They are non-interventionist because they involve no artificial presentation or arrangement of language. Objectives of learning are negotiated between teacher and the learners as the course evolves. Teachers and learners are joint decision makers in the choice of the syllabus. The focus is more on learning rather than the subject matter.

### 2.4. Six Types of Syllabus

The choice of syllabus is a major decision in language teaching. Several distinct types of language teaching syllabi have been proposed by different scholars (Nunan, 1987; White, 1988; Long & Crookes, 1992; Prabhu, 1987; Rabbini, 2000). Rahimpour (2010), Rabbini (2000), and Taray (1988) listed six types of syllabi:

1. *Structural*: Historically, according to Rabbini (2000), the most prevalent of syllabus in which the selection, gradation, and sequencing of materials or the content is based on the notion of complexity and simplicity of grammatical items.

2. *Situational*: Dissatisfaction with structural approaches to syllabus design led to the development an alternative approach where the point of departure became situational needs rather than language patterns. Here, the unit of analysis is a set of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs.

3. *Functional/Notional*: Wilkin's criticism of structural and situational approaches lies in the fact that they answer only the HOW or WHEN and WHERE of language (Rahimpour, 2010; Rabbini, 2000). Then, the starting point for a syllabus is the communicative purpose and conceptual meaning of the language. However, the same problems relevant to previous approaches do exist. Widdowson (1990) argued that the difference between functional/notional and structural syllabus is not of a type but of a degree. Functional/notional syllabus belongs to the same synthetic and product-oriented type.

4. *Skill-based*: The content of language teaching is a collection of specific abilities that may play a part in using language such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse, etc. Together into generalized types of behaviour. The primary purpose of skill-based instruction (Tarey, 1988) is to learn the specific language skills. A possible secondary purpose is to develop more general competence in the language.

5. *Content-based*: The primary purpose of instruction is to teach or present some content or information using the language that the students are also learning. The subject matter is of priority and language learning occurs incidentally to the content leaning.

6. *Task-based*: The content of the language is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students want or need to perform with the language they are learning. Tasks are used as the units of analysis and they integrate

language skills in specific settings of language use. Task-based teaching is different from other approaches in that the learners draw upon their own linguistic resources to complete some pieces of work (a process).

A task-based approach to syllabi creates a favourable condition for language learning and facilitates language development. Among the above-mentioned approaches to foreign and second language syllabus designs, task-based approach focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity, not on the explicit teaching of the grammar of the language and have been the focus of concern among language teachers, researcher in the field of second language acquisition, and syllabus design (Prabhu, 1987; Robinson, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2007; Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 2003, 2008; Rahimpour, 1999, 2008, 2010). There are three kinds of proposals for task-based approaches to syllabus design:

1. *Procedural syllabus* (Prabhu, 1987)
2. *Process syllabus* (Breen, 2001)
3. *Task-based language teaching* (Long & Crooks, 1992)

While differing from one another in certain ways, all three approaches share the rejection of linguistic elements as the units of analysis. Tasks are graded and sequenced by their degree of difficulty. Task complexity is not the reflection of traditional linguistic grading criteria. Rather, it results from task factor themselves. This might be a number of steps involved, the number of solutions to the problems, the number of elements, the location of task in displaced time and space, the amount and kind of language acquired, the number of competing for attention, and cognitive and social factors (Long & Crooks, 1992, p: 45; Rahimpour, 2010, p:1662).

Task-based language teaching is also different from other approaches in that identifying possible sources of task complexity indeed is a necessary prerequisite for making principled decisions concerning the grading and sequencing of tasks, upon which much of the value of task-based language teaching will rest. Grading and sequencing of pedagogic task is indeed a major challenge for task-based syllabi. Unlike other approaches to syllabus design, in TBLT the criteria for grading and sequencing material is based on cognitive complexity which is defined as the result of the attentional, memory, reasoning, and other information-processing demands imposed by the structure of the task to the language learner (Robinson, 2001, p: 29).

## Conclusion and pedagogical implications

Understanding the nature of the syllabus and its typology will provide language teachers with a good knowledge of units of analysis as well as assist them in determining a valid criterion for grading and sequencing of the tasks and activities in the classroom.

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