



# Types of Language Syllabuses

Session 4

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# Introduction

- Syllabus design is thought to be based essentially on a decision about the 'units' of classroom activity, and the sequence in which they are to be performed (Robinson, 1998).
- Various types of approaches to syllabus design have employed different units; there are structural, functional and notional, skills, communicative, and task-based syllabuses.
- However, there have been continuous attempts to categorise them into two main strands (Wilkins, 1976; White, 1988; Long and Crookes, 1992, 1993).

# Product based Vs. Process based Syllabuses

- White (1988: 44) has classified syllabuses into two main types, Type A and Type B.
- He (1988: 45) said that ‘in relation to language teaching syllabuses, these two types can be summarized in terms of the distinction between an interventionist approach which gives priority to the pre-specification of linguistic or other content or skill objectives on the one hand; and non-interventionist, experiential, ‘natural growth’ approach on the other, “which aims to immerse the learners in real-life communication without any artificial preselection or arrangement of items” (Allen 1984: 65)’.
- He has summarized the salient characteristics of these two types, as he considered, as follow:

# Product based Vs. Process based Syllabuses

Type A What is to be learnt?	Type B How is it to be learnt?
Interventionist	
External to the learner	Internal to the learner
Other directed	Inner directed or self fulfilling
Determined by authority	Negotiated between learners and teachers
Teacher as decision-maker	Learner and teacher as joint decision makers
Content = what the subject is to the expert	Content = what the subject is to the learner
Content = a gift to the learner from the teacher or knower	Content = what the learner brings and wants
Objectives defined in advance	Objectives described afterwards
Subject emphasis	Process emphasis
Assessment by achievement or by mastery	Assessment in relationship to learners' criteria of success
Doing things to the learner	Doing things for or with the learner

# Product based Vs. Process based Syllabuses

- Ellis (cited in White, 1988: 46) suggests that what White has termed a Type A syllabus contributes directly to analytic L2 knowledge, which is the kind of knowledge involved in knowing about the language, its parts, rules and organization.
- It is this kind of knowledge which, he suggests, is not available for 'unplanned discourse', that is, the kind of language use which occurs in spontaneous communication where there is no time or opportunity to prepare what will be said.
- In comparison, a Type B syllabus contributes to what Ellis has called 'primary processes', which automatize existing non-analytic knowledge.
- This type of knowledge is available for 'unplanned discourse'.

# Product based Vs. Process based Syllabuses

- In Type A syllabuses, whether the focus is form, function or skills, the basis for such syllabuses remains essentially the same, as White (1988) said.
- The basis for such syllabuses is on objectives to be achieved, content to be learned.
- Any such syllabus will be based on lists of items to be learnt, whether these are grammatical structures, categories of communication function, topics, themes or communicative and cognitive skills.
- In contrast, in a Type B syllabus, content is subordinate to learning process and pedagogical procedure.
- The concern of the syllabus designer is with 'How' rather than 'What' and the basis for such a syllabus will be psychological and pedagogical rather than linguistic, the view being either a learner-centered or a learning-centered one.

# Product based Vs. Process based Syllabuses

- One can summarize the distinction between product-based syllabuses and process-based syllabuses by saying that product-based syllabuses are those in which the focus is on the knowledge and skills that learners should gain as a result of instruction.
- While, process-based syllabuses are those which focus on the learning experiences themselves.

# Synthetic vs. Analytic syllabuses

- Wilkins (1976) made the classic distinction between synthetic and analytic syllabuses in the language classroom.
- Synthetic syllabuses, similar to type A syllabuses in White (1988), segment the target language into discrete linguistic items for presentation one at a time: “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 of language has been built up...At any one time the learner is being exposed to a deliberately limited sample of language. The language that is mastered in one unit of learning is added to that which has been acquired in the preceding units.” (Wilkins, 1976: 2).



# Synthetic Syllabuses

- The language learning process is seen as the steady accumulation of linguistic rules and items, in the ultimate direction of command of the second language.
- It is assumed that the learner is able to learn language in parts, and to integrate them when the time comes to use them for communicative purposes.
- Wilkins (1976) indicated that the learner's role is "to re-synthesise the language that has been broken down into a large number of small pieces with the aim of making his learning task easier".

# Synthetic Syllabuses

- Synthetic approaches to syllabus design characterise many traditional or conventional language courses and textbooks.
- The actual units according to which synthetic syllabuses are organised vary. Structural, lexical, notional and functional, and most situational and topical syllabuses are all synthetic (Long and Crookes, 1992, 1993; Long and Robinson, 1998).

# Synthetic Syllabuses

- Synthetic syllabuses, also called "focus on forms" in Long and Robinson (1998), however, have been criticised for major problems, which include:
  - (a) absence of needs analysis;
  - (b) linguistic grading;
  - (c) lack of support from language learning theory;
  - (d) ignorance of learners' role in language development;
  - (e) tendency to produce boring lessons, despite the best efforts of highly skilled teachers and textbook writers; and
  - (f) production of many more false beginners than finishers (see Long and Robinson 1998 for more detail).

# Analytic Syllabuses

- The second fundamental type of syllabus distinguished by Wilkins is the analytic.
- In analytic syllabuses, the “prior analysis of the total language system into discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of a synthetic approach is largely superfluous... Analytic approaches ... are organised 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, 1976:13).
- Here a chunk of language is presented to the learner in the context of a meaning oriented lesson.

# Analytic Syllabuses

- ‘Analytic’ refers not to what the syllabus designer does, but to the operations required of the learner to recognise and analyse the linguistic components of the language chunks presented.
- Long and Crookes (1993: 11) update Wilkins’ definition, pointing out that “analytic syllabuses are those that present the target language whole chunks at a time, in molar rather than molecular units, without linguistic interference or control.

# Analytic Syllabuses

- They rely on
- (a) the learners' presumed ability to perceive regularities in the input and induce rules, and/or
- (b) the continued availability to learners of innate knowledge of linguistic universals and the ways language can vary, knowledge which can be reactivated by exposure to natural samples of the L2.
- Procedural, process, and task syllabuses are examples of the analytic syllabus type.

# Analytic Syllabuses

- Although arguably "more sensitive to SLA processes and learner variable" than synthetic syllabuses (Robinson, 1998), some types of analytic syllabuses, also called "focus on meaning" in Long and Robinson (1998), have been criticised for, for example,
- lack of needs analysis,
- lack of accuracy attained,
- unlearnability of some grammatical features from positive evidence only,
- and deprivation of the opportunity to speed up the rate of learning.

# Readings

- For more information:
- Robinson, P. (1998) State of the art: SLA theory and second language syllabus design. *The Language Teacher*, 22: 7-14.
- Next Session:
- Breen, M.P. (1987a). Contemporary Paradigms in Syllabus Design: Part 1. *Language Teaching*, Vol. 20/2: 81-92.
- Breen, M.P. (1987b). Contemporary Paradigms in Syllabus Design: Part 2. *Language Teaching*, Vol. 20/3: 157-174.