

Syllabus writing

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Writing or developing an English language syllabus is a difficult task. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. In my 25 years of teaching, I have had syllabi imposed upon me, I have had course books given to me with no syllabus guidelines, I have been given a class and no syllabus and told to make up my own and I have been involved in major syllabus development projects for general English and English for specific purposes.

Regardless of who the syllabus is for, writing a syllabus will still follow certain guidelines and involve similar considerations.

Types of syllabi

Syllabi can be divided into two different types: Product-oriented and process oriented. Product oriented syllabi focus on what learners will know as a result of instruction and they typically list a selection of graded items to be 'learnt' by the learners.

Product-oriented syllabi

- **Grammatical**
One of the most common type of syllabus and still today we can see the contents pages of many course books set out according to grammatical items. This type of syllabus presents structures, which are graded according to grammatical complexity, one by one and are supposedly internalised by learners before moving on to the next item.
- **Functional / Notional**
Because of criticism surrounding the structural / grammatical syllabus, syllabi were designed around functions and notions of language. The functional-notional syllabus focused on what the learner needed to do with the language. It was suggested by Finocchiaro and Brumfit that this type of syllabus placed 'the students and their communicative purposes at the centre of the curriculum'. (Nunan 1988)
- **Lexical**
A lexical syllabus uses vocabulary as the building blocks. Usually stemming from an analysis of high frequency vocabulary and phrases they work from language in use and build up vocabulary areas.

Process-oriented syllabi

More recently, applied linguists have become more concerned with the pedagogic processes of how we achieve our outcomes.

- **Task based**
Because of this we saw the advent of the task-based syllabus planned around a sequence of tasks which learners have to carry out in the classroom, with emphasis being placed on the communication of meaning. This provides learners with the necessary skills to cope with real life situations. They are involved in real communication and all which that incurs: Checking understanding, restructuring to aid comprehension, etc. as well as allowing space for both planned and unplanned discourse.

- **Learner centred**

Most recently the learner centred syllabus with strong emphasis on learner training has become fashionable. This takes into account differing learning styles and aims to make the learner independent. They see language learning as being only a part of a lifelong learning process. Thus self-evaluation, learning how to learn and training in how to develop skills become central.

Nunan asserts that 'any curriculum which fails to give due consideration to both product and process will be defective.' Product and process oriented syllabuses are seen on a continuum where we should be aiming to take the process into account, but we should also have objectives, that is, we need to state what our learners will be able to do as a result of instruction.

Before you start to write a syllabus

First the teaching situation and the intended learner group should be analysed

Teaching situation: What constraints are you working under that you cannot change? These might include.

- ***Type of assessment***

If external this could have tremendous impact on your syllabus.

- **Resources/ staffing available**

Are there 50 children in a class with only a blackboard? Are there computers? Can students have access to a computer lab for independent and class Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) work.

- **Learner geography**

How much exposure will students get outside of the class? Time period and/or intensive Vs spread out. This impacts on the amount of material you could cover and also the structure of the individual weekly plan.

- **Books**

Does a core course book exist that the syllabus must be built round or are you writing a syllabus from scratch?

Consult with the people involved in teaching the syllabus. Teachers and heads of departments must be involved from the beginning so that they do not feel that the syllabus is being imposed on them and thus gives them a sense of ownership

Intended learner group

There is quite a lot of information you need and decisions you can make about your intended learners.

- **Learner needs**

Based on learner profile (age, level, interests, reasons for learning) Do a needs analysis. This can range from a full blown formal multiple choice computer test and oral interview to an informal chat at the beginning of the course where you ask the class what their needs are.

- **Strengths and weaknesses**

Does the nationality as a group or the group as a group of learners have common problems? Do they have a different script and therefore find writing a problem? Are there sounds in English that they don't have in the L1?

Setting learning objectives

From the above, learning objectives must be written. These may be externally enforced or ideally come from learner needs but in the real world they are usually a mix of both. They may also be restricted by resources. Objectives might come from the course book although the course book should not be seen as the syllabus.

These can be written in terms of 'can do' statements:

- The learner can talk about likes and dislikes
- The learner can narrate a story in the past tense.
- etc.

With the list of can do statements and the course book or the materials you will develop you can start developing the structure of the syllabus. The ones above become in the syllabus; "Expressing likes and dislikes" and "Narrating a story set in the past." Decisions must then be taken on the following:

- **Balance of skills Vs grammar and vocabulary**
You need to make sure there is balance in the syllabus, taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the group and their aims in studying.
- **New language Vs practise opportunities**
You should ensure a balance of input Vs revision. This should be about one third to two thirds.
- **Outcomes**
Make sure you know what do you want the learners to be able to do by the end of the course.
- **Suitability of topics**
Are some topics in the course book culturally inappropriate or just considered boring?

Once you have the ways in which you will achieve the learning objectives written down, you could also consider the following:

- **Independent skills training**
Some learner training both within the syllabus, in and outside of class: e.g. dictionary use, vocabulary recording, introduction to independent study resources
- **Space**
Leave blank spaces to cater for individual teacher and learner styles and to allow for flexibility to catch up or extra lessons on identified weak areas.
- **Homework**

Once the syllabus is written

The work isn't over when you finish writing the syllabus. You'll still need to:

- Pilot it with at least one class. Get feedback from the teachers and the learners and then adapt it.
- Make sure teachers know about it and do not think it is just another piece of paper that can be shelved.

- Make sure teachers receive training in how to use it and also training in any new methodology that has been incorporated in it. This will give the syllabus project credibility.
- Involve the teachers again. Encourage feedback so it can be changed. The first draft will never be perfect and can only be finalised once it has been trailed and tested. Feedback should be taken on board and changes made accordingly.

Conclusion

Syllabus writing is a long process and one which requires constant reflection and revision. You may have to accept that some people will never be happy with it and that it won't suit everyone. It does however, remain an essential part of the teaching and learning process.

Further reading

Nunan D. **Communicative Syllabus Design** Cambridge University Press
Finocchiaro and Brumfit. **The functional-notional approach** O U P.