

# SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE SYLLABUS DESIGN

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## Abstract

*Studies and articles that focus on describing and classifying foreign language syllabuses are dominated by the product / process dichotomy. Nevertheless, this is not always the case, as there are authors who, apparently, use other criteria to produce their own taxonomy. Thus, this paper attempts to provide a brief chronological outline of the various descriptions found in the syllabus design literature, so that the principles underlying the proposed taxonomies could be identified and critical comparisons could be performed.*

**Keywords:** *foreign language, syllabus design, taxonomy, content, methodology, objectives*

## 1. Introduction

Envisaging curriculum as either product or process has led to characterizing foreign language syllabuses in terms of these two possible models. Foreign language syllabus design literature is indebted to this dichotomy, as many authors (among others Breen 1987a, b; White 1988; Nunan 1988, Johnson 2009) choose this approach when performing their analysis.

Nevertheless, the terminology used by various authors dealing with this topic might differ to a certain extent, and this could cause ambiguity for foreign language teachers less familiar with educational concepts. Moreover, there are authors who do not start their foreign language syllabus description from the product vs process dichotomy, but from other criteria, such as the operations required of the learners (Wilkins, 1976), or content (Krahnke, 1987), as, traditionally, language learning has been seen as a linguistic, rather than an educational matter.

Therefore, a chronological literature review of foreign language syllabus design classifications might prove useful as, in this manner, one could spot out the relation between educational theory and foreign language syllabus design, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, one could sketch the evolution of foreign language syllabus design. Wilkins's *Notional Syllabuses* (1976) will represent the starting point for this paper as it is generally acknowledged as one of the first studies focusing on foreign language syllabus design (Breen 1987a, Krahnke 1987, Yalden 1987, Nunan 1988, White 1988, Widdowson 1990, Long and Crookes 1992, Johnson 2009).

## 2. Synthetic vs. Analytic Syllabuses

Wilkins's classification of syllabus design into synthetic and analytic is directly related to the operations required of the learner in the acquisition process. Thus, the synthetic syllabus divides the target language into discrete linguistic elements which are gradually

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introduced to the learner, so that the language acquisition process is as smooth as possible. The learner's aim is to resynthesize the language, step by step, until structural diversity is achieved; the grammatical syllabus is considered the best example of the synthetic approach to syllabus design (Wilkins 1976:7). In contrast, analytic syllabuses focus on the learner and his needs and on the kinds of linguistic performance necessary to achieve those goals (Wilkins, 1976:13-14). Situational and notional syllabuses fall under this category, with Wilkins outlining the superiority of the analytic approach.

Though foreign language syllabus design could be labelled as either synthetic or analytic, Wilkins (1976) considers that, in practice, these two options are difficult to meet in *pure* form, as they are rather the extreme points of a continuum. Thus, any actual syllabus, while being designed stemming from the principles defending one of the two approaches, will, in fact, exhibit a certain degree of ambivalence. As for the influence of the educational theory on Wilkins's dichotomy, there is little evidence, the syllabus types included in his analysis being described more from a linguistic point of view.

### 3. Propositional and Process Plans

Taking into consideration the way in which language knowledge and the capabilities of language use are represented in existing syllabuses, Breen (1987a,b) distinguishes between two main abstract categories that are in an antithetical relation – propositional plans versus process plans, which is in fact a recoinage of the product-process dichotomy. Propositional plans aim to represent what is to be achieved through teaching and learning as formal statements, the expected outcomes being systematically organised and presented in these syllabus types as logical formulae, structures, networks, rules or schemes (Breen, 1987a:85). Process plans, on the other hand, focus on how correctness, appropriacy and meaningfulness can be simultaneously achieved during communication within events and situations (Breen, 1987b:160). Therefore, process plans represent an alternative paradigm, which emerged as views on language, teaching methodology, learner contributions and planning for language teaching underwent dramatic changes.

Formal and functional syllabuses exemplify propositional plans and, although they both strongly rely upon descriptive linguistics and upon language learners' being cognitively able to approach learning in an orderly manner, they differ in what each of them selects as appropriate content and in how they subdivide and sequence this content. Thus, the formal syllabus – known also as the structural or grammatical syllabus – represents the traditional type of syllabus used in foreign language teaching and learning. The selection and subdivision of its content is based on the language descriptions given by academic linguists to various subsystems and their rules (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, morphology and the structural features of discourse). Receptive skills receive special treatment as the purpose of the teaching-learning process is for the learner to achieve accuracy by gradual accumulation and synthesis. Unlike the formal syllabus, the functional syllabus explicitly addresses the pedagogic priority of offering learners a semantic and interpersonal framework within which language code or text may be located. The functional or notional syllabus is directly indebted to pragmatics and sociolinguistics, as it is closely connected with the concept of communicative competence<sup>1</sup>, being less influenced by the practicalities of classroom experience (Breen, 1987a:88). Thus, this kind of syllabus, using functions, notions or topics, or even situations as the frame for subdivision of content, focuses on acquiring an appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Communicative competence represents how we relate our linguistic competence to our social use competence. (Hymes, 1972)

language behaviour, suitable for particular social activities or events, gradually developing first receptive skills and then productive skills, in a re-cycling and accumulative way.

Task-based and process syllabuses are categorized as process plans, as they both explore the relationship between content and method within a syllabus (Breen, 1987b:158-160). The task-based syllabus organises and presents what is to be achieved through teaching and learning in terms of how a learner may engage his or her communicative competence in undertaking a range of tasks. Two main task types (communication tasks and learning tasks) are incorporated in the syllabus, sharing a mutually supportive role, facilitating learning and generating genuine communication. The process syllabus goes further in relation to procedures for learning, being a representation of how communication and learning to communicate might be variously undertaken in the specific situation of the language classroom. Thus, the process syllabus aims at the teacher and learners' jointly creating and implementing the syllabus. Nevertheless, the process syllabus is an extension of the task-based syllabus and it therefore rests also upon the justifications for the existence of the latter (Breen, 1987b:169).

Breen acknowledges the tensions that exist at theoretical level between the foreign language syllabus prototypes that he included in his analysis. Nevertheless, in his opinion, process plans cannot be thought of in complete isolation from propositional plans. Thus, although process plans obviously stand out due to new alternative features, they also incorporate 'the proven beneficial features of earlier plans' (Breen, 1987b:172). As for the relation between educational theory and foreign language syllabus design, Breen's analysis outlines the importance of assimilating educational concepts when dealing with foreign language syllabus design.

#### **4. Language content, process and product in syllabus design**

Dubin and Olshtain (1987) consider that foreign language syllabus design evolved in close connection with the shifting views on the nature of language and the nature of language learning. Thus, in their opinion, foreign language syllabuses vary according to whether they stress language content (the specific matter to be included), process (the manner in which language content is learned) or product (outcomes, such as the language skills learners are expected to master), even if, ideally, syllabus designers should try to give equal weight to all three dimensions (Dubin and Olshtain, 1987:45).

Under the language content dimension, Dubin and Olshtain place the structural-grammatical syllabus, the semantico-notional syllabus, the functional syllabus and the situational syllabus which, in their view, could be organized in linear, modular, cyclical, matrix and story-line format, depending on the objectives that have to be achieved. On the other hand, the process dimension involves (1) the organisation of the language content which brings about certain activities; (2) the roles that teachers and learners take on during the learning process and (3) the types of activities and tasks in which learners are engaged, thus, Dubin and Olshtain (1987:46-48) equating process with methodology. As for the product dimension, Dubin and Olshtain (1987:49) outline the importance of establishing clear syllabus outcomes based on learners' needs, under the form of explicit knowledge and skills to be acquired.

To a certain extent, Dubin and Olshtain's characterisation of syllabus design is less in line with the product-process dichotomy as it appears with authors such as Breen (1987), Nunan (1988) or White (1988). The process and the product dimensions put forth by Dubin and Olshtain could actually represent stages in curriculum design viewed from a utilitarian perspective. This could be explained by the fact that the curriculum and syllabus concepts are

often used interchangeably, and thus overlap in educational literature (see also Yalden, 1987; White, 1988; Rodgers, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Thornbury, 2006).

### 5. Syllabus design: form vs. meaning

Krahnke (1987) analyses foreign language syllabus design assuming that content plays the major part in the entire developing process. Theory of language and theory of learning both influence foreign language syllabus design, as content is made up of subject matter (what to talk about) and linguistic matter (how to talk about it). Therefore, according to Krahnke (1987:4), designing a syllabus means deciding what to teach in what order and in what manner.

Depending on the emphasis given to either form or meaning, Krahnke identifies six archetypes of foreign language syllabus: the structural syllabus, the notional functional syllabus, the situational syllabus, the skill-based syllabus, the task-based syllabus and the content-based syllabus. Krahnke points to the fact that, in practice, these different types rarely occur independently of each other and that any actual syllabus represents a combination of two or more syllabus types, more or less integrated, with one type as the organizing basis around which the others are arranged and related.

Even if the product-process dichotomy is not explicitly used to differentiate between the six types of syllabuses, the other parallelisms used by Krahnke (subject matter vs. linguistic matter; form vs. meaning; language structure vs. language use) are in fact possible terminological equivalents, from the narrower point of view of linguistics literature. Krahnke's detailed description of the strengths and weaknesses of these syllabus types, as well as the well-documented analysis of the possibilities of combining and integrating these syllabus types represent a step forward in foreign language design literature, though approaching this matter from an educational perspective might have proved beneficial.

### 6. Proportional Syllabus

Apart from the influence exerted by applied linguistics on foreign language teaching, Yalden (1987:7, 59, 61, 77) also acknowledges the relatively new role played by educational theory on foreign language teaching, particularly in the form of curriculum development in institutional settings. In Yalden's *Principles of Course Design for Language Teachers* (1987), the importance of educational thought on foreign language teaching is outlined, though, at times, from a terminological point of view, this is quite difficult to grasp.

According to Yalden, syllabuses fall into two main categories: traditional and contemporary. The former is focused on teaching the grammar or structure of the language, whereas the latter has many variations due to theoretical developments<sup>2</sup> in second language pedagogy, more exactly to communicative teaching methodology, as this was the watchword in that decade. Thus, considering that that a syllabus is the result of the interplay between theory and practice<sup>3</sup>, Yalden identifies and briefly introduces five syllabus models: the functional syllabus, the negotiated syllabus, the natural syllabus, the subject matter syllabus and the task-based syllabus. They are all circumscribed to communicative language teaching and they differ in point of the roles assigned to and the relationships built between the linguist/psycholinguist, the teacher and the learner; one could even envisage particular groups of learners who could productively benefit from each type of syllabus (Yalden, 1987:61-68).

<sup>2</sup> According to Yalden (1987:59), the disciplines that constitute the foundations of second language pedagogy are: theoretical and descriptive linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

<sup>3</sup> In Yalden's words 'between the linguist and the teacher' (Yalden, 1987:61).

Even if, explicitly, the analysis grid for the five contemporary syllabuses was not conceived based on the product-process dichotomy, the discussion that follows it is developed in terms of the product-process divide<sup>4</sup>. Yalden (1987:74) stresses out the benefits of the communicative approach to language teaching and, hence, designing the foreign language syllabus focusing on the process dimension: ‘teachers and course designers ought to be much more concerned with the way learners may act upon and interact with linguistic data than with the prior selection and organisation of the data’. Nevertheless, Yalden is in favour of a combined approach to syllabus design – the proportional syllabus. Developed in two phases<sup>5</sup>, this type of syllabus ‘can achieve a certain coincidence between the needs and aims of the learner and the activities that will take place in the classroom’ (Yalden, 1987:86).

### **7. Product-oriented syllabuses and process-oriented syllabuses**

In Nunan’s view there is a broad and a narrow approach to syllabus design. According to the narrow view, syllabus design represents the selection and grading of content, whereas the broad view advocates the importance of including methodology (selection of learning tasks and activities) in the syllabus design process (Nunan, 1988:5). These opposing views to syllabus design are in fact instances of the product-process dichotomy, which Nunan reduces to ‘the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as result of instruction’ versus ‘the learning experiences themselves’ (Nunan, 1988:27).

As far as content is concerned, it could comprise all or at least some of the following elements: grammatical structures, functions, notions, topics, themes, situations, activities and tasks. According to Nunan (1988:12), ‘each of these elements is either product or process oriented, and the inclusion of each will be justified taking into consideration the beliefs about the nature of language, the needs of the learners or the nature of learning’. Thus, these variables will dictate the design of the required syllabus.

Though starting from the analytic-synthetic distinction proposed by Wilkins (1976), Nunan (1988) goes further in his analysis of the product-oriented syllabuses, suggesting that the term ‘synthetic’ may be applied to any syllabus in which the content is product-oriented. Thus, the grammatical (or structural) syllabus and the functional-notional syllabus exemplify this type of syllabus, as they focus on the end products or results of the teaching/learning process.

As for process-oriented syllabuses, Nunan distinguishes between two main categories: procedural syllabuses and task-based syllabuses. Relying on the classroom processes which stimulate learning, both types of syllabuses specify the tasks and activities that learners will engage in class. Nevertheless, they are different in practice: the procedural syllabus exclusively focus on learning processes and there is little or no attempt to relate these processes to outcomes, whereas with the task-based syllabus, the designer conducts a needs analysis which yields a list of the target tasks that the targeted learners will need to carry out in the ‘real-world’ outside the classroom (Nunan, 1988:44-48).

### **8. Type A Syllabuses and Type B Syllabuses**

White (1988:45) uses a new terminology to distinguish between existing syllabuses: Type A Syllabuses and Type B Syllabuses, defining the former in terms of an interventionist approach, which gives priority to the pre-specification of linguistic or other content or skill

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<sup>4</sup> Yalden (1987:74) uses the phrase ‘process-oriented’ to label the natural syllabus and the subject matter syllabus

<sup>5</sup> Phase 1 = preparing the ‘protosyllabus’; Phase 2 = designing and implementing the pedagogical syllabus.

objectives and the latter in terms of a non-interventionist, experiential, natural growth approach. Thus, despite employing a different terminology, in White's study, we have the same dichotomy – product versus process (relabelled as A=what vs B=how), reiterated: Type A Syllabuses focus on the goals to be attained and the content to be taught; with Type B Syllabuses, the content is subordinated to the learning process and methodology.

In type A tradition, White (1988) includes 5 syllabuses, which differ in point of content selection and organisation: (1) the structural syllabus; (2) the functional syllabus; (3) the situational syllabus; (4) the topic-based syllabus and (5) the skill-based syllabus. Going on the same lines as Krahnke, White (1988) stresses the difficulty of identifying these syllabuses in pure form, suggesting that, in practice, hybrid syllabuses are most common, as they represent possible combinations of type A syllabuses, aiming to reach a balance between form and function.

According to White (1988:94-95), there are two syllabuses which belong to type B tradition: the process syllabus and the procedural syllabus. Both syllabuses focus on methodology, but the former is learner-led, being impossible to predict in advance what route the syllabus will follow, whereas the latter is teacher-led, the selection and the organisation of the tasks being controlled by the teacher. Moreover, each of the two Type B syllabuses approaches learning differently: the process syllabus is indebted to cognitive theories of information processing and learning; the procedural syllabus shows more direct influence from Second Language Acquisition theory and research.

Thus, with White (1988), just like with Breen (1987a,b), developments in educational theory are fully assimilated into the discussion of foreign language syllabus design. Educational concepts are used to distinguish between types of syllabus referred to in the foreign language teaching literature, marking a new stage in the field.

### **9. Three approaches to task-based syllabus**

After performing a brief critical review on syllabus design literature (by mainly referring to Wilkins's and White's descriptions), Long and Crookes (1992) focus on process syllabuses, considering their potential and contrasting their features. Therefore, Long and Crookes (1992) are not concerned with reinforcing the product-process dichotomy or devising a new foreign language syllabus classification, but rather with describing Type B syllabuses in point of strengths and weaknesses and with providing arguments for approaching foreign language syllabus design from this perspective.

For Long and Crookes (1992), there are three possible alternatives for the process dimension of foreign language syllabus design: procedural, process and task syllabuses. As far as the procedural and the process syllabuses are concerned, Long and Crookes' descriptions are similar to White's (shortly presented in the previous section of this paper). Nevertheless, Long and Crookes go further, pointing to existing flaws in the conception of both procedural and process syllabuses. Thus, for the procedural syllabus, Long and Crookes (1992:37) point to three problems: there is no needs analysis that could lead to task selection; task grading and sequencing are arbitrary processes; the importance of form in foreign language teaching is disconsidered. As for the process syllabus, criticisms go along the same lines: no needs identification; no clear indication for task selection and grading; no reference to form; no relation with theory or research in Second Language Acquisition (Long and Crookes, 1992:41).

Overcoming the weaknesses of procedural and process syllabus, the task-based syllabus could represent 'a viable unit around which to organize language teaching and learning opportunities' (Long and Crookes, 1992:27). Thus, according to Long and Crookes (1992:41), this type of syllabus is an improved formula as it well-grounded on (1) the findings

about the processes involved in second language learning; (2) the findings of second language classroom research; (3) principles of course design made explicit in the 1970s, chiefly in EFL contexts, for the teaching of languages for specific purposes. And yet, the task-based syllabus also evinces some problems: there are limits with second language acquisition and classroom research because of inconsistent methodology; little empirical support available for parameters of task classification and grading; the difficulty of defining the concept of 'task'; decreased learner autonomy due to preplanning and guidance; no complete implementation and evaluation of this type of syllabus. Therefore, Long and Crookes (1992: 47) suggest that further classroom research is needed, as this could provide the badly necessary support especially for task-based syllabus.

### 10. The Integrated Syllabus

Richards' approach to foreign language syllabus design is not stemming from the product-process dichotomy. In his study, Richards enumerates the various syllabus frameworks available in the literature, explaining their organizing principles, making no reference to either the product or the process dimension. Thus, according to Richards (2001: 153-165), the options in foreign language syllabus design are: the grammatical or structural syllabus, the lexical syllabus, the functional syllabus, the situational syllabus, the topical or content-based syllabus, the competency-based syllabus, the skills syllabus, the task-based syllabus, the text-based syllabus. By pointing to the strengths and weaknesses of each syllabus, Richards' description is meant to provide a documented analysis of possible options, informing those involved in foreign language syllabus design of the micro and macrolevels characterizing any syllabus planning. Thus, sharing Krahnke's view, Richards (2001:164) advocates the necessity of approaching the syllabus in an integrated manner, as in practice 'all syllabuses reflect some degree of integration.'

### 11. The Multidimensional Syllabus

In labelling existing syllabuses, Johnson uses the product-process dichotomy, as well as the synthetic-analytic and type A and type B distinctions pointed earlier in this paper. The seven syllabus types identified by Johnson (2009:309-333) are: the 'traditional' structural syllabus, the lexical syllabus and the notional/functional syllabus, which belong to the product tradition and the process syllabus, the procedural syllabus, the task-based syllabus and the content-based syllabus which are circumscribed to the process dimension. Similarly with previously mentioned studies, Johnson critically analyses each syllabus starting from the learning and teaching theories that lie behind the syllabuses.

Acknowledging the gap between theory and practice in syllabus design, Johnson (2009: 330) considers that the seven syllabus models are not 'mutually exclusive', as 'different syllabus specifications may be combined to create what is sometimes referred to as the *multidimensional syllabus*'. Even if it is difficult to find a balance among the parameters that could be used to project a multidimensional syllabus, Johnson (2009: 330-331) suggests two possibilities: (1) choosing one main unit of organisation, whereas the others revolves round it; (2) shifting the unit of organisation at different points in the course for as wide a coverage as possible. Thus, even if, in theory, syllabus models could favour *part or whole, form or meaning, control or freedom*, in practice, one could combine them by means of the multidimensional syllabus.

## 12. Conclusions

This brief literature review on foreign language syllabus design was mainly meant to function as a starting point for those interested in this topic. This paper also aimed to critically compare the descriptions provided by some of the most influential authors in the field, so that each author's contribution could stand out and the evolution of foreign language syllabus design in the last four decades could be approached by those who are less familiar with the theoretical aspects of foreign language syllabus design.

Chronologically, literature on foreign language syllabus design has little by little become indebted to the product-process dichotomy. Gradually assimilating findings and developments in linguistics, educational psychology, sociolinguistics and education, foreign language syllabus design is now a complex task and it is important for both syllabus designers and teachers to be familiar with the existing options. Even if, as a teacher, one could rely on previous experience to foreign language teaching and learning when making decisions on what and how to teach, it might be sensible to consider that better results are more easily achieved and, moreover, the teaching-learning process perceptibly improves if intuition is accompanied by theoretical knowledge tested in practical circumstances.

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