



ELT Teacher Trainees' Encounters with Syllabus Design

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Abstract

In ELT (English Language Teaching) departments, prospective teachers come across a wide range of methodological domains which are applied and theoretical. Most of the instructional patterns can be practiced in microteachings. Upon feedback, the mistakes can be corrected and the procedures reworked if required. Nevertheless, syllabus, which is the basic system of instruction, is mostly out of reach in terms of 'design' in teacher training programs. Trainees may have access to discussions about the syllabuses of the course-books they analyze only if there is a course focusing on course-book analysis and adaptation in the teacher training program. Naturally, the applied concern with syllabus design is mostly at introductory level. In many geographies, syllabuses come ready and the publishers and instructors implement it with some flexibility. In classroom application, mostly, the contents sections of the course-books contain the language materials (grammar patterns and vocabulary) to be studied and they basically represent the syllabi to be followed by the instructors. There is generally on-line access to the curricula for further assistance. When teacher training is concerned, the pre-service familiarity with syllabus types and design plays an important part prospectively for the future implementation and assessment of the teaching programs. The trainees, in this respect, have to develop an insight into syllabus design and adaptation as well as types for further encounters. This argument attempts to touch on teacher trainees possible encounters with the syllabus. The encounters of the prospective teachers with syllabus design may be of very introductory nature such as discovering and examining the basics of syllabus design, types of syllabus, grammar and syllabus relationship, and syllabus adaptation. Naturally, the microteachings that trainees present contain language patterns from a syllabus. In this vein, their familiarity with syllabus issues is fundamental.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Syllabus evolution in ELT

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Syllabus in the post-methods era is a phenomenal matter in FLT (Foreign Language Teaching). In the mid-century methods era, there were recognized methods and syllabi which were designed around them. Mostly there was one to one correspondence between them. Upon the impact of the developments in applied linguistics and methodological evolution in FLT, flexible thinking in technical design came into view. In the eclectic teaching trends and their miscellaneous collections of techniques, syllabus design requires eclectic attention. The multi-focus approach to this issue requires attention on behalf of designers, book writers, and teachers. Another consideration is the teacher trainees' encounters with the syllabi. This is an important matter in teacher training. Should there be brief discussions in the methodology courses or should there be some applied experiences designed for this purpose? Definitely, this domain requires theoretical and applied work in teacher training period.

1.2. Views

Ur (1996) defines syllabus as a list which contains words, structures, and topics or tasks and methods. The first one which lists content is more popular. A syllabus is a text easily accessible by everyone involved including parents. It has explicit objectives and the items are ordered from easy to more complex. The syllabus types are given as follows; grammatical, lexical, grammatical-lexical, situational, topic based, notional, functional-notional, mixed or multi-strand, procedural, and process. Ur reminds the ways how people use syllabuses. Some may follow it strictly; some refer to it rarely; some adapt or totally reproduce it. According to Nunan (1988) the circumstances enable only a few instructors to design their own syllabuses and it is expected that most teachers are in a position to analyze and adapt them before the implementation.

Graves (1991) describes a syllabus as a structure which gives information about a course and it contains goals, objectives, topics and assessment components. Curriculum, on the other hand, is an active, interrelated, unified, and overlapping procedure. Graves lists the syllabus types as grammatical, notional-functional, task-based, lexical, genre or text-based, and negotiated. Skills-based approaches, project-based language learning, and content-based instruction and content integrated language learning are also included in the list. Designing, implementing and assessing a syllabus are parts of a recurring progression.

Wilkins (1979) state that the changes in language teaching paradoxically existed in methods rather than the language patterns offered. Grammar translation method, audio lingual method, and structural methods depend on teaching the target language by splitting it into parts determined by grammatical categories. As a conclusion, most text books were based on grammatical syllabus. The situational syllabus which could be an alternative to the grammatical one assumes that language occurs in its social context and they should not be separated in instruction. The suggestion is that, language teaching

should be geared according to learners' needs. So it appeared as a learner-based syllabus as opposed to the structural subject-based syllabus called grammatical syllabus. In application the situational syllabus has to guess the probable situations the learners involve in. Of course, situational labels should replace grammatical ones.

Wilkins (1979) argues that a situational syllabus is not ideal for general English courses since it answers the questions 'when and where' considering specific group of learners and their specific functions. Wilkins suggests a semantic or notional syllabus which highlights the grammatical patterns by which relevant notions are expressed. Wilkins divides the categories of a notional syllabus into two. The first group contains time, quantity, space, matter, case, and deixis. The second group includes modality, moral evaluation, discipline suasion, argument, rational enquiry and exposition, personal emotions, emotional relations, and interpersonal relations. Wilkins (1979) concludes that foreign language teaching aims at letting learners exploit the patterns and words they learned in resourceful interactive performances. Yalden (1983) argues that the communicative syllabus should include purpose, setting, role, communicative events, language functions, notions, discourse and rhetorical skills, varieties of the foreign language, grammatical content, and lexical content as vital components.

Woods (1996) argues that teachers' interpretation of the curriculum is an important issue since it affects structuring the instruction. The decision making process is crucial in structuring the events in a course. Decision making which is a cognitive action creates deeds. Teachers may not be the prime decision makers but the facilitators of the program and evaluators of the students' success.

2. Prospective Teachers' Encounters with Syllabus Design

2.1. Basics of syllabus design

The following parts attempt to briefly discuss various points which may constitute teacher trainees pre-encounters with syllabus issues. There should be some slots for them in methodology courses in ELT departments.

A range of approaches to syllabus design exist. In the methodology courses, teacher trainees should examine the commonly used syllabuses in the mainstream schools. Furthermore, they should base their presentations on this type of syllabi. They must examine the basics of these programs of study, particularly the approach to language teaching and learning, the language use policy, the collection of language structures, and types of materials. This close examination will assist them in the future since the great majority of them will utilize such syllabi in their actual instruction.

2.2. Syllabus types and Syllabus recognition

The FLT syllabus types are various and diverse as quoted above. As is in the case of FLT methods, they all assess foreign language teaching from their own perspectives. Teacher trainees should recognize the stand point from which each syllabus attempts to direct and operate foreign language instruction. As a further thinking point, teacher trainees should attempt to distinguish to what extent and which basics of syllabus design exist or not included in different types as well as recognizing the features and types of different syllabi.

2.3. Method and syllabus interaction

There is a close connection between foreign language teaching methods and syllabi. Without a specifically designed or systematically matching syllabus no method can function as intended. Prospective teachers should be able to recognize the connection between them. This bond determines the formation and design of the unit structures that construct the syllabus. Such awareness technically improves the comprehension and future implementation of the syllabi.

2.4. Post-methods era and syllabus issues

The eclectic logic of the post-methods era avoids the methodically fixed thread of FLT mostly produced for mid-century methods. The eclectic approach requires eclectic syllabi with language use and communication in the center. A syllabus of this sort requires all dimensions that exist in popular syllabi and the potential dimensions in line with the developments in the world and in education. The issues that may arise due to the needs of the learners in the changing world and new teaching materials and technologies cannot be ignored.

2.5. Syllabus and language structure coordination

Grammar-phobia in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) causes troubles in instruction. Chaos appears when the place of language structures in FLT programs is discussed. To be precise, the well-known reaction against the mechanical teaching of grammar has affected instruction. The place of grammar in teaching has been the focal concern in the evolution of methods and the syllabi designed for them. The language structure is always there even if it is not felt directly. The explicit or implicit handling of language structures in instruction due to the different types of syllabi should be discussed by teacher trainees in methodology courses. They have to argue that in contemporary TEFL ‘grammar’ is not sensed and experienced directly.

2.6. Access to curriculum and syllabi

There is online access to the curricula and the syllabi used in mainstream schools and private schools. As mentioned above, prospective teachers should examine them and construct bridges between the microteachings they will design and the syllabus utilized by the school they want to work at in near future.

3. Discussion

3.1. Informed syllabus adaptation and eclecticism

The design of a syllabus does not end after its introduction. The dynamics of teaching may differ in diverse settings. Many teachers make course-book adaptations in order to meet learner needs. In many settings, syllabus adaptation may be required or may automatically occur. This type of flexibility may always be needed nevertheless the alterations to be made should conform to methodological standards and the deviation should always be positive (Sarigöz 2000). Teacher trainees must recognize that syllabus adaptation should normally be understood as the methodological elasticity allowed by the curriculum. Such an adjustment must comply with the methodological principles and learner needs and should be carried out professionally. Trainees can observe such rework at practice teaching schools if occurs.

3.2. Skills to adapt the syllabus and standardization of the routines in the syllabus

As discussed above deviations from the standard syllabus will affect the contents and the routines. In order to make minor or major modifications, certain skills are required. Firstly, such adaptations require a sense of methodological authority. Secondly the new additions must be in reference to the standard requirements. Then, the new additions must be piloted and their harmony with the original program must be evaluated. After such steps the new accumulations can be included in the routine course of action. Naturally, in many ELT departments prospective teachers practice making comparable changes at course-book evaluation and adaptation level and it gives them a sense of material adaptation.

3.3. Syllabus management

Syllabus is a vital component of foreign language instruction. Its management which includes how to follow it and how to adapt it requires professional experience. Although teacher trainees utilize very limited parts of a syllabus in their microteachings, they have to develop an insight into syllabus implementation and management. This is fundamental in terms of supervising their own instruction when their actual teaching in the future is considered.

3.4. Inter-syllabi connectivity between different subjects

Today, school programs require interdisciplinary consideration. Many subjects at schools require synchronization of subjects. For instance, if the subject ‘time’ has not been studied in students’ basic courses in native language, the foreign language teacher may not introduce it until they are ready. There may be many other school subjects of this sort which require inter-syllabi synchronization. This is a critical dimension that must be considered in syllabus management.

3.5. Basics of argumentation in the class with students for the new syllabus

Argumentative syllabus design is a contemporary contribution to schooling and TEFL programs. The dose of argumentation that will affect the syllabus contents may alter. Such an approach to instruction may increase motivation, level of student responsibility, type of contextualization, learner involvement and may decrease forced participation. Teachers in training should gain insight into argumentation in order to manage or develop future syllabi to be implemented.

3.6. Post-syllabus assessment

Every year teachers who teach the contents of a syllabus may look back at the end of the year and make post-syllabus assessment. Through their regular observations and final assessment, they detect the points to be developed and they may manage the required uplift. The teacher trainees do not have the opportunity to have such an experience nevertheless they can consult with the class teacher in practicum and brainstorm how to boost up the program for the coming year.

4. Conclusions

Syllabus design, management, and adaptation are among the fundamental processes in TEFL. In many teacher training colleges, prospective teachers design single language-skill and integrated language-skills microteachings in eclectic fashion and present them in methodology classes. They teach language patterns and vocabulary chosen from the given syllabus. In their initial encounters with such programs, they have to study syllabus types and their evolution. At the same time they have to experience syllabus analysis and adaptation at introductory level in order to gain insight into syllabus issues.

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