SOME SYLLABI DESCRIPTIONS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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When designing a "SYLLABUS" at the beginning of a course or semester, we find some difficulties concerning the appropriate selection of the type of syllabus we want to develop through the course. This selection implies that we have to consider several aspects such as the students´ needs, the institution policy, the syllabus, the instructional resources among others.

However, a very common problem deals with the little knowledge some of us have about types of the existing syllabi, their main goals, and their positive and negative aspects.

We will intend to carry out a brief explanation of some types of syllabi and we hope this article serves somehow, as a reference guide for those teachers who are interested in exploring other possibilities different from those that have been used regularly.

First, we want to make the difference between two terms that apparently have the same meaning: "CURRICULUM" and "SYLLABUS".

Allen (1984) states that: "...curriculum is a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex of phylosophycal, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational program."

As far as a syllabus is concerned, the same author points out: "syllabus... refers to that subpart of curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught..."

Crombie (1985) argues that: "A syllabus, as generally conceived, is a list or inventory of items or units with which learners are to be familiarized."

The previous concepts lead us to conclude that curriculum subordinates syllabus. The latter involves the types of content to be taught in a series of planned steps reflecting the general goals stated by the curriculum in an educational program.

TYPES OF SYLLABI

1. THE STRUCTURAL SYLLABUS

It assumes that the grammar and structures are the most outstanding aspects because they provide the bases to develop the functional ability. The sentence is the most important and the biggest unit to be considered.

This type of syllabus includes grammatical forms such as: nouns, verbs, adjectives, sentence formation, tense system, clauses, determiners, articles, prepositions, gender markers, and so on.

The structural syllabus suggests an analysis of a language in terms of rules which

HOW

explain why an utterance is right or wrong. The students are expected to be able to use the structure, instead of being able to make judgements about them.

It seems to be that this syllabus follows a behaviorist conception since it states that languages are better learned through conscious knowledge of the forms and the rules of the language. Methods such as Audiolingual, Grammar-Translation, and even the Silent Way are always associated with the structural syllabus.

Selecting the instructional content is not a problem in this syllabus, but the sequencing or grading of the content is. Strict sequencing criteria should be avoided.

EXAMPLES OF STRUCTURAL SYLLABI

- Demonstrative pronouns
- Possessive adjectives
- Possessive pronouns
- Subject pronouns
- Be, present tense
- Imperatives
- Simple past
- Future with going to
- Comparatives
- Tag questions
- Count and mass nouns
- Frequency adverbs
- If sentences
- The passive voice
- Modal auxiliaries

ADVANTAGES

- Grammar is the most general component of communicative competence.
- Grammar is always expected in a language class.
- Content is easy to describe and better

defined than functions.
- Structural knowledge is easy to measure.
- Some evidence shows that a high proficiency can be achieved when earlier instruction of the form of the language has been given.
- Structural knowledge can play an important role as the basis for the learner to "monitor" the accuracy and self-correction of the utterances (Monitor Theory), although complex rules seem to decrease the accuracy of language production.
- Learner errors are corrected with specific reference to previous rules.
- Grammar forms can be taught without involving the cultural values that are associated with the language.

DISADVANTAGES

- There is almost no evidence that structural knowledge can affect behaviour in language use.
- Students learn about the language, not the language.
- A strict structural syllabus limits the free use of the language if the needed structure has not been taught yet.

2. THE NOTIONAL-FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

According to this syllabus, functions and notions are more useful and important than forms, and describing WHAT, WHEN, HOW and WHY using those functions and notions, is more relevant than learning grammatical descriptions.

This syllabus deals with a semantic rather than a mechanical point of view and socio-linguistic aspects such as speaker status, the

place and time of the conmmunication act, and the activity, will determine the form, tone and other characteristics of the language.

The notional-functional syllabus is quite motivating because it reflects the real social and cultural students´ needs.

EXAMPLES OF NOTIONAL-FUNCTIONAL SYLLABI

- Talking about sickness.
- Making a suggestion.
- Accepting a suggestion.
- Rejecting a suggestion.
- Agreeing to a request.
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ANOTHER TYPE OF CONTENT

- Refusing an invitation.
- Asking for information.
- Accepting an offer.
- Giving information.

Julia M. Dobson (Forum, Vol. xvii, 1979) provides an excellent list of function categories to be taken into consideration in the design of this type of syllabus.

ADVANTAGES

- A Notional Functional syllabus includes information about the language use, so that learners see it as a communicative system.
- This syllabus provides specific types of discourse which the learners will use effectively.
- It also includes the grammatical and situational factors used in different situations.

DISADVANTAGES

- If only short utterences involving functions are used, the student will have difficulties to handle them in longer discourses.
- Functions are not useful in all life situations.
- Stratton (1977) states that this syllabus can be useful for advanced EFL and ESL students at University levels, but it can cause serious problems when your audience is formed by children and zero-level adults.

3. THE SITUATIONAL SYLLABUS

It claims the use of the language in specific situations involving the participants engaged in some activity.

Alexander (1976) established a taxonomy about the types of situational syllabi as follows:

- LIMBO SITUATION: It is one in which the specific setting of the situation is not really important and the particular language is.

- CONCRETE SITUATION: Both the setting and the language are important.

- MYTHICAL SITUATION: It comprises fictional characters and places.

Dialogues are the best known ways of presenting a situation in which the students are expected to play elaborated dialogues and to create or complete them.

Taylor (1982) accounts for the distinction between "realistic" and "real" language. The former has to do with language used in the classroom to simulate actual situations; the latter deals with language occurring outside the classroom with some artificial limitations.

EXAMPLES OF SITUATIONAL SYLLABI

- The service station
- Downtown
- Fire!
- The universe
- Housework

Another example:

- At the dentist office
- Travel plans
- On a diet
- T.V. news

ADVANTAGES

- Form and meaning work together in a specific context.
- This syllabus permits the students to communicate directly in a specific setting.
- A good situation provides social and cultural information of the target language.

DISADVANTAGES

- Students learn predetermined chunks of language avoiding their creativity to negotiate language.
- It is still unknown which is the authentic language used by native speakers in a specific situation.
- A situational content may provide unwanted language values.
- It is quite difficult to determine which sequence of situations is the most appropriate in instructional syllabi.

4. THE SKILL-BASED SYLLABUS

The primary purpose of this syllabus is to learn a specific language skill to be used independently of the situation in which language occurs.

This syllabus has been used in language for specific purpose programs to satisfy students' particular needs; instruction in specific skills is provided and frequently it is combined with structural, situational and functional contents.

It includes a collection of abilities such as listening for gist, reading for scanning or skimming, taking language tests, writing about specific topics, delivering public talks, and so on.

A general view of this type of syllabus suggests that language is better learned into pieces of language (skills) which are to be put together when actually using them.

EXAMPLE OF A SKILL-BASED SYLLABUS

- Guessing vocabulary from a context
- Using affixes as clues to meaning
- Inferencing
- Dictionary work
- Analysis of paragraph structure
- Summarizing readings
- Critical reading skills

ADVANTAGES

- Students learn specific types of language use reflecting their needs.
- Students show high motivation with this type of instructional content because it helps them to achieve their specific goals.

DISADVANTAGES

- It is hesitant to expect an overall proficiency when teaching specific skills.
- Social implications are always associated with this syllabus since the instructional program can generate certain types of unwanted behavior.

5. THE CONTENT-BASED SYLLABUS

According to this type of syllabus, students are taught some content in the language being learned in such a way that they can learn both something about the language and some content that they are interested in. It can be associated with language for specific purpose (LSP) in which the main concern is not an excellent command of a language, but a contribution to the school subject the students are learning.

The content-based instruction does not clearly distinguish form and function and it suggests learning without explicit instruction.

EXAMPLE OF A CONTENT-BASED SYLLABUS

It is necessarily associated with the content course in science, social studies, art or any other subject.

Normally, further supporting readings regarding the subject being taught, are provided to increase vocabulary, spelling or specific writing activities.

ADVANTAGES

- Students can learn a language and a subject simultaneously.
- Language is learned in the context of its use.
- There is a close connection between students´ needs and the language provided in the classroom.
- This syllabus guarantees somewhow, a good students´ motivation since language presents material the students find interesting.

DISADVANTAGES

- It can cause fossilization if appropriate monitoring is not given.
- It can cause some problems with beginning or low-level adult students.

The types of syllabi mentioned above, show some possibilities the teachers have when tackling the decision about what instructional content could be more appropriate in such a way that it reflects the students´ needs.

Rarely do these types of syllabi occur independently and it is possible and sometimes advisable to integrate them. They are not completely different from each other.

The teachers´ attitudes towards language instruction is definitely important since they may have a powerful influence on the syllabus according to their profile or what they know.

The major concern in choosing the syllabus content must be the students´ needs, their expectations, prior knowledge and the teacher's experience.

Before designing your syllabus content, it would be advisable to consider the following steps:

- Consider what the students are expected to do at the end of the course.
- Compare different syllabi if decision is complex.
- Evaluate available resources.
- Determine one or two syllabi as dominant and one or two as secondary.
- Put in practice what you have planned in the different units.

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