Examining the Underlying Principles of EFL Syllabus Design

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Introduction

English language teaching (EFL) is in the midst of another significant paradigm shift. A primary reason for this has been the decline in recent years of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Starting as far back as the mid 1980's some began to question many aspects of CLT.[1] Today the process of CLT's disintegration has reached the point to where it has become the whipping boy of an increasing number of educators. Now the word "communicative" is rarely used in the major ELT research journals without an air of reserve or skepticism, if it is used at all. For example, Jennings and Doyle state that CLT as an approach has often become the platform for "...unprincipled eclecticism, varying from teacher to teacher".[2] Shortall points out that so many approaches (PPP/Task-based Learning, Notional-Functional, Silent Way, ect.) are called "communicative", CLT has become impossible to define.[3] Skehan maintains that CLT's emphasis of verbal fluency over formal accuracy "...runs the risk of learners becoming confined to the strategic solutions they develop, without sufficient focus for structural change or accuracy."[4] Batstone warns that CLT's unbalanced approach to language teaching leads to the early fossilization of the learners' language skills.[5]

Language teachers can be forgiven if they find themselves feeling a bit betrayed by an ELT establishment which, just a few years ago, strongly supported CLT. Nevertheless, since the 1970's, with the inception of the Notional-Functional syllabus, there has been a discernable cycle in which second language syllabi have been advocated, only later to be cast aside in favor of another approach. Professional language teachers often feel

disenchanted with the tendency of the ELT academic community to promote a new syllabus design every few years—designs which sometimes have limited pedagogic effect in monolingual language classrooms like Japan. Sheen reflects these feelings when he writes, "...frequent paradigm shifts...have not resulted in significant progress in language learning."[6] During this current paradigm shift, no attractive syllabus design has yet emerged to replace CLT, although there are a few pretenders, (such as the so-called Task-based Syllabus). This current stagnation has left many language teachers and publishers feeling cut adrift without an instructional compass.

Times such as these will compel some language teachers to redefine their understanding of second language teaching and learning.[7] Others, after finding themselves dashed upon the rocks of classroom reality, will conclude that theory and practice cancel each other out into a pedagogic implosion. Still more, when faced with a long day of classes, attempt to ignore the issue of syllabus design altogether and allow the textbook designers decide for them. This last procedure is in tacit agreement with Widdowson, who asserts:

> Which kind of syllabus a teacher has to work with is relatively unimportant. This is fortunate since she very often has no choice in the matter anyway. What is important is that teachers should understand the principles underlying the characterization of content in a particular syllabus so that they might adopt or adapt these effectively in the area where they do have room for independent action, namely in the mediating activities of classroom methodology.[8]

Is the role of syllabus design relevant for language teachers? Does it matter if language teachers understand the inner workings of a syllabus' design? Will it make a difference which syllabus one adopts for his or her class? Is a syllabus, as Widdowson states, "...an inert abstract object," or is it at the very heart

of everything we do and hope to do in our classrooms?[9]

Objectives

This paper addresses these issues by first attempting to define what is meant by the word "syllabus." The importance of teachers knowing their rationale for choosing a particular syllabus design will be discussed by reviewing the fundamental aspects of most syllabus designs. A brief forecast of syllabus designs to watch for in the years to come will conclude this paper.

Syllabus and Curriculum: What are They?

Questions arise concerning the distinction between the terms *curriculum* and *syllabus*. Part of the confusion stems from the North American understanding of the term curriculum, which is often used interchangeably with syllabus. Both can be used in America to mean teachers' requirements for a particular course. Numan defines *curriculum* "...as concerned with the planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs."[10] Not only is this definition generally accepted by most applied linguists (see Stern, 1992:20, and Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985), it seems to agree with the popular use of the term in Japanese academic circles.[11]

The Japanese use of the word "syllabus" often reflects American influence because it refers to a written statement that provides learners with the teacher's expectations and course requirements. However, the academic community disagrees on the best way to define the term. For example, Widdowson interprets a syllabus as

> ...the specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners... a syllabus specification, then, is concerned with both the selection and the ordering of what is to be taught.[12]

Nunan sees a syllabus as a process that "...focus [es] more narrowly on the selection of grading and content."[13] Yalden feels that a syllabus

> ...replaces the concept of 'method', and the syllabus is now seen as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of 'fit' between the needs and aims of the learner (as social being and as individual) and the activities which will take place in the classroom.[14]

Brumfit defines a syllabus as "...a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds and so is negotiable and adjustable."[15] Richards, Platt and Weber describe a "...syllabus which is organised around tasks, rather than in terms of grammar of vocabulary."[16] Candlin defines a syllabus as a means for encouraging learners to challenge the pedagogic ideologies and views of reality which the syllabus designer brings to the class.[17]

I believe that a syllabus both represents and rewards adherence to a set of sociolinguistic beliefs regarding power, education and cognition. It is a political manifesto because it reveals the designers' views on authority and status. Control normally takes place through a system of rewards for those who adapt to it, and punishments for those who rebel against it. Syllabus as a concept is also a philosophical statement about learning and cognition, because certain methods for teaching and learning will be upheld as beneficial, based upon the syllabus designers' beliefs about how people think and construe reality. Partly because it is not as observable as a curriculum or class, the term syllabus is more abstract than is commonly supposed. However, the influence of a particular syllabus design is extensive. The curriculum will emanate from the parameters set by the syllabus. The class will be a moment in time when
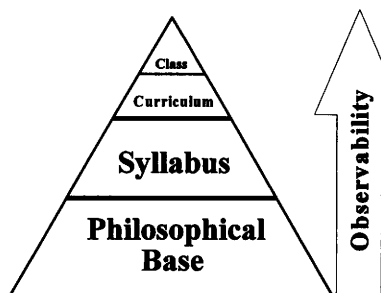
Figure 1

learners are encouraged to center on the educational elements defined in the curriculum. The educational focus, selection of materials and manner of presentation are all supported by an implicit philosophical nexus by which reality is organized (see Figure One).

Second language acquisition reseachers generally agree that learners operate from an internal syllabus, meaning that language learners seem to have an innate ability to acquire a second language and process it.[18] It makes sense that language teachers also operate from their own internal syllabus, which guides them in their decisions about which textbook to opt for, how to teach and what elements of the target language should be taught. Long and Crookes also support this view, saying that a teacher's syllabus will designate

> ...the elements of the target language they present to their students—words, structures, notions, etc. —and how they should be presented...the type of syllabus choice will have a pervasive influence on decisions in other areas, while the converse is not necessarily true.[19]

While Long and Crookes express doubts about a teacher changing his or her internal syllabus, I am more optimistic. I am in agreement with Kelly's congnitivist view of personal constructs, of which one postulate states that once a person has gained enough new information, he or she may be willing to change the way he or she looks at a situation (defined by Kelly as *constructs*).[20] In this view, once a person is willing to reconsider his or her preconceived notions, quite often a lasting change in a person's actions will take place. Nunan and Lamb as well as Richards and Lockhart maintain that language teachers should

take the time to better understand their own philosophical base to gain deeper insight into their internal syllabus.[21] Doing so encourages teachers to reassess their educational practices and beliefs, which in turn results in a lasting change in their internal syllabi.

A Survey of Second Language Syllabus Types

Long and Crookes (1993:10) have noted the astounding diversity of syllabus types that are presently available to us: communicative, content-based, functional, lexical, notional, procedural, process, situational, skills, structural, task-based, topical, and several hybrid syllabi, such as Yalden's proportional syllabus.[22] It would take considerable time to point out the strengths and weaknesses of every language syllabus design. Fortunately for our purposes, this will not be necessary.

White (1988:44-47) explains that all current syllabi fall under two categories, which he calls *Type A* and *Type B* syllabi.[23] Type A syllabi deal with *what* should be learned in a second language classroom. The emphasis is upon subject and content. Course objectives are detemined weeks ahead of the class. The teacher is the authority and main resource person for the students. The teacher decides what items the students must master and how they will be evaluated. What is done in class is external to the learner and interventionist. In other words, things are done to the learner.

Type B syllabi consider the question of *how* a second language should be learned. The emphasis is upon the learning process. Objectives are decided during the course and are based upon the needs of the learners. The teacher and students work together with the study focus and the testing format is negotiable. What happens in class is internal to the learner. Things are done *with* the learner. White categorizes content or skills-based syllabi as type A and methods-based syllabi as the B.[24] Wilkins builds on this distinction by separating language syllabi into *synthetic* and *analytic* categories. Synthetic syllabi teach

...different parts of language [which] are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure has been built up...At any one time the learner is being exposed to a deliberately limited sample of language.[25]

Analytic syllabi operate

...in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes.[26]

It can be concluded that analytic syllabi, so to speak, look at the forest, while synthetic syllabi look at the trees. Long and Crookes carry through with Wilkins' syllabus types to identify "...structural, lexical, notional, functional, and most situational and topical syllabuses [as] synthetic," and, "...procedural, process and task syllabuses [as] examples of the analytic syllabus type."[27] Wilkins described analytic and synthetic syllabi as proportional.[28] Syllabi that bolster second language curricula are never completely analytic or synthetic in nature. The total relationship of White, Wilkins and Long & Crookes' ideas is
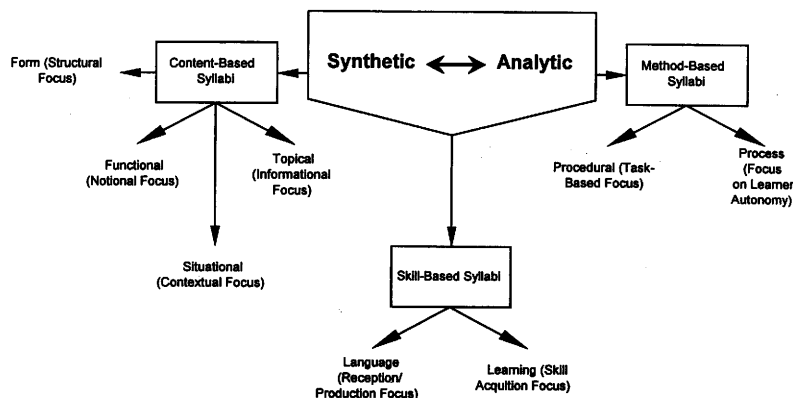

Figure 2 A Matrix for Understanding Second Language Syllabus Designs.

shown in Figure Two. It is observed that the strongest form of a Type A Synthetic Syllabus focuses on form and structure, while a process approach highlighting learner autonomy is the most extreme version of a Type B Analytic Syllabus.

Relative Strengths and Weaknesses of Basic Syllabus Designs

Due to the complexity of teaching a foreign language, any syllabus will have its share of strengths and weaknesses. The Type A synthetic syllabus approach is powerful in the minds of many educational policy-makers, publishers and teachers who have little time to innovate. Type A synthetic syllabi are readily available to teachers. Most publishers produce volumes of Type A Synthetic materials. Many teachers like this syllabus design because it is logical, organized and provides a measure of accountability with the school administration. Testing is easy with Type A syllabi. Students often seem to accept the approach of this design, mostly because it is used in other academic disciplines besides TEFL. It is ressuring for students because they can know with a greater degree of certainty what should be memorized for the test. Language can be broken down into comprehensible bits so that students will not be overwhelmed by the enormity of the target language. Perhaps the main argument for Type A synthetic syllabi is the belief that a focus on accuracy will lead to fluency.

However, SLA research findings tend to suggest that learning is more successful when the students are actively engaged in using the language rather than in simply dissecting it into functions, notions, topics or descriptive grammar. White explains:

> ...the evidence from SLA research throws considerable doubt on traditional justifications for Type A syllabuses. The general tenor of such research findings is that it is *methodology* rather than organization which may hold the key to successful language teaching and learning.[29]

Almost every applied linguist takes great joy in poking holes into Type A synthetic syllabi. Long and Crookes conclude that while Type A synthetic syllabi help students to master certain isolated forms, they are left unable to put this mastery into practice outside the classroom.[30] Actual language is different, and simplifying the language into small bits or items merely distorts it. They also point out that what is taught in class is not necessarily learned by students. A main assumption in Type A synthetic syllabi is that learning is a linear process. Willis is quick to point out:

> All that we know about the way people learn language may not be a great deal, but we know how people *don't* learn languages, and they don't learn them like that...they don't learn them by adding on one little bit at a time.[31]

Approaching second language teaching synthetically can be likened to the person who takes apart a clock to study each piece, only to find out later that it cannot be put back together again. Willis continues:

> It is actually impossible to separate a [bit] and say, 'This is an item. You may do it for the purpose of syllabus specification, but it is a very artificial exercise, because [language] only has meaning when in relation with other 'items'.[32]

Wills rightly maintains that Type A syllabi focus less on accuracy and more on *conformity* to the structure of language (and to the teacher). The curriculum that emerges from such a syllabus design will require students to prove their obedience to the institution through test performance. The issue of conformity may bring us closer to the reason why Type A synthetic syllabi continue to be the *modus operandi* of many language curricula

across Japan. Such an approach may fit closer with the internal syllabi and philosophical nexus of influential educators, and ultimately, the society at large.[33]

Type B analytic syllabi, on the other hand, take the concerns of the learners into deeper consideration and seem to focus on the business of learning rather than of teaching. Candlin feels that empowering students to become involved in the learning process has the potential of making a class intrinsically motivating since the students would have the chance to study according to their interests.[34] Type B syllabi take learning styles, differing rates of second language comprehension and cognitive development into consideration, and seek to merge these factors with language teaching methodology. To use the analogy of a journey, Type A synthetic syllabi are similar to a package tour with the teacher as a guide, while Type B analytic syllabi are closer to a trip in which a group of friends decide on a daily basis where they would like to go and what they would like to do. White illustrates:

> Indeed, it is likely that most teachers, if asked to compare initial plans with eventual outcomes, would acknowledge that what they and their students actually did during the course of a year did not exactly match what they thought they would do. Inevitably, there is a process of give and take (or negotiation) which detemines the eventual journey and possibly even the destination. Candlin's proposal is, in part, to build this process of negotiation into the system rather than to ignore it.[35]

Some SLA researchers suggest that Type B analytic syllabi appear more compatible with many language learners' internal syllabi.[36] Learners tend to be more concerned with comprehension than with grammatical accuracy. Prabhu asserts that Type B syllabi meet the needs of learners by concentrating on meaning over form:

...it was decided that teaching should consequently be concerned with creating conditions for coping with the meaning in the classroom, to the exclusion of any deliberate regulation of the development of grammatical competence or a mere simulation of language behavior.[37]

Yet while many researchers praise the potential of Type B syllabi, few openly advocate its use. Kouraogo points out that in actual language classrooms, Type B analytic syllabi's focus on meaning and fluency tend to cause language learners' metalanguage to petrify too soon.[38] Nunan asserts that Type B syllabi do not attempt to bring the learning processes to any satisfying result.[39]

For the Japanese ELT context, doubts about Type B syllabi may be warranted. Griffee described his experiment with process and procedural syllabi at Seigakuin University.[40] After decidedly mixed results, he concluded that Japanese students lack the experience to generate their own goals and objectives for a class:

In real life, 19-year-old Japanese university students can and do decide what they want and take concrete measures to achieve their goals as witness the proliferation of expensive ski equipment and frequent ski trips. However, when it comes to English language learning strategies which are required to be stated in an abstract, foreign metalanguage, students have less training, less experience, and perhaps less desire.[41]

Griffee's findings agree with my own experience with using Type B syllabi at Niigata University. Over a period of two years, in three separate classes, I experimented with a learner-centered, process syllabus. Two of the three classes suffered a significant loss of class time waiting for students to

reach a consensus. The result was a series of unfocused lessons, students attempting to wile away the time chatting in Japanese and a disturbingly high number of absences. The third class was very successful in terms of having clearly defined goals, focused lessons, high attendance, enthusiastic learning and greater time spent using English. However, the third class developed a dark side. Later it was observed that four members of the class who didn't want to participate were excluded, and peer pressure forced one to angrily drop out of the course.

White warns that abdicating control of the course to immature, unmotivated learners creates the danger of a non-learning experience—an EFL class which is aimless and unsatisfying for everyone involved:

> There is little point in substituting a pedagogical magical mystery tour for a reasonably well-defined educational destination and such a warning may need to be kept in mind when replacing prescription by negotiation.[42]

Toward an Eclectic Approach

It can be seen that any syllabus design, if taken to extremes, will have a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Whatever position language teachers take, they will need to accept the pedagogic consequences of their decision. Most language teachers will take probably opt for White's position:

> In the end, a hybrid syllabus will probably result, not simply because of theoretical considerations, but because, in the day-to-day world of teaching, this will be the compromise which satisfies most interest groups, and I personally would fine it difficult to argue against such a pragmatic solution.[43]

Martin points out that an eclectic approach is not only common sense, it is "...the best available choice since variety

is the spice of language."[44] Ultimately an eclectic approach to syllabus design is the most logical, but only if it is an *informed* choice. One cannot use the term "eclectic" as a pretty facade for unprofessionalism.

Future Trends in EFL Syllabus Designs

Perhaps as a response to the ambiguity of the CLT movement, in recent years there has been a return to form, topicality and structure. Many have expressed a renewed interest in Pedagogic Grammar (PG). Yamamoto-Wilson's opinion is one that is receiving growing support within the TEFL academic community:

> Is it really necessary to reject a grammatical approach in order to espouse a communicative one? Isn't there a need for a more rounded approach, giving students a grounding in language structure at the same time as developing their communicative competence?[45]

Proponents for PG are not calling for a return to the bad old days of structural grammars, nor for a return to a grammar –translation approach. What is currently contemplated is some sort of middle ground between the product and process approaches to teaching grammar. Although Batstone feels that most attempts to bridge this "critical gap" often end with a focus on product teaching and no real movement toward process work, several ways to bridge this gap are currently being suggested.[46] Most of

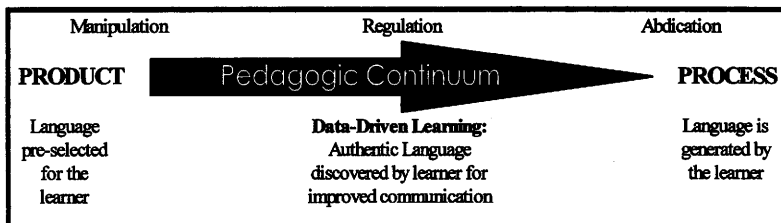| Manipulation	Regulation	Abdication
PRODUCT	Pedagogic Continuum	**PROCESS**
Language pre-selected for the learner	**Data-Driven Learning:** Authentic Language discovered by learner for improved communication	Language is generated by the learner

Figure 3 A Continuum Moving from Product (Synthetic-based) to Process (Analytic-based) Grammar Learning with DDL as a pedagogic linking technique.

them involve some form of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), such as Data-Driven Learning (See Figure Three).

For intermediate and advanced language learners, there have been increasing calls for the creation of content courses, that is, courses which teach other subjects (such as math, science, or social studies) in English. Variations on this theme are being proposed in colleges and universities across Japan. Published reports on the work underway at Keio University, Asia University, Tokyo Christian University, Miyazaki International College and Niigata University suggest that future Japanese university students may spend less time learning *about* English and spend more time learning *in* English.[47] The manner in which content classes are reported to be taught at these and other universities appears to be Topical or Situational Content Based in nature. Language learning at these schools is beginning to take a secondary role to the transfer of information. As Poulshock writes, "...the main objective is to help students master content material. Language learning is incidental."[48]

The next several years will likely see a continued shift from analytic, learner-based or skill-based syllabi toward synthetic content-based syllabi. Language classes will see a greater emphasis on form, and often on the topical, ideological concerns of policy-makers (Environmentalism, Internationalization, etc.). Evidence of this trend can be seen locally as evidenced from the tentative experiments with content courses at Keiwa College and Niigata University.[49] However, the question of whether such trends can blossom into a pedagogic renaissance for tertiary ELT will largely depend on if innovators are able to secure the long-term acceptance of their reforms nationwide. An important factor in that success hinges on the willingness of influential language teachers and policy-makers to redefine their internal syllabi.

Conclusion

The role of syllabus design is an important consideration

for every language teacher. Contrary to Widdowson's assertion at the beginning of this paper, the kind of syllabus a language teacher operates from is highly significant.[50] Since in many Japanese universities, instructors are free to build upon the syllabus design they feel is most appropriate for their students, the issue should not be ignored. Clarifying one's internal syllabus is important because a teacher can apply this insight to his or her classroom approach and practices. This may often result in a greater focus with the direction taken in class. Students who perceive this aura of self-confidence will likely be more willing to invest themselves in the classroom experience. The returns from such a clarification are immediate. In defining our philosophical base, we can ultimately improve our craft as teachers.

NOTES

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