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# ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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By

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to examine the currents in language syllabus design and to highlight the issues relevant to teachers considering creating their own curricula with specific reference to the development of language teaching and learning. It will hopefully help the instructors to better evaluate their own programmes and course books. It is therefore concerned with linguistic theories and theories of language learning and how they are applied in the classroom.*

In the past, the focus of syllabus shifted from structure to situations, functions and notions to topics and tasks. In fact, as Nunan (1988:52) suggests, with the development of the latter, it is palpable that “the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology has become blurred”.

A syllabus is an expression of opinion on the nature of language and learning; it acts as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be attained. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:80) define syllabus as follows: “at its simplest level, a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learnt which reflects of language and linguistic performance”. This is a rather traditional interpretation of syllabus focusing as it does on outcomes rather than process. However, a syllabus can also be seen as a “summary of the content to which learners will be exposed” (Yalden, 1987:87). It is seen as an approximation of what will be taught and that it cannot accurately predict what will be learnt. A language teaching syllabus involves the integration of subject matter and linguistic matter. To Olaoye (2002:50), a syllabus is a

statement of the plan of any part of the curriculum. It does not include evaluation; rather it is a plan which is convened to classroom activities which could be modified, renewed or scrapped by the designer.

Initially, several questions were posed about syllabus design, such as: do you want a product or process oriented syllabus? Will the course be teacher or learner led? What are the goals of the program and the needs of your students? This leads to an examination of the degree to which the various elements will be integrated, which is of great significance to White (1988:92) who comments that, “A complete syllabus specification will include all five aspects which are; structure, function, situation, topic and skill. The difference between syllabuses will lie in the priority given to each of these aspects. Eclecticism is a common feature of the majority of course books under the communicative banner currently on offer. Attempting to combine the various aspects of language has also been addressed by Hutchinson and Water (1987:89), who state that, “any teaching material must in reality operate several syllabuses at the same time”. One of them will probably be used as the principal organizing feature but the others are still there.

To design a syllabus is to decide what gets taught and in what order. For this reason, the theory of language underlying the language teaching method will play a major role in determining what syllabus should be adopted. The theory of learning also plays an important part in determining the kinds of syllabus used. For example, a syllabus based on the theory of learning evolved by cognitive code teaching would emphasize language forms and whatever explicit descriptive knowledge about those forms. A syllabus based on an acquisition theory of learning, however, would emphasize unanalysed and carefully selected; experience of the new language teaching, and information as possible. There has been much confusion over the years as to what different types of content are possible in language teaching syllabi and as to whether the difference are in syllabus or method.

The authors shall proceed by looking at the needs analysis for syllabus design, the different approaches to syllabus design and then summary and conclusion.

### **Needs Analysis for Syllabus Design**

The course syllabus is the primary document through which you communicate to students your course goals, expectations of students, and assessment/evaluation criteria. Research on teaching and learning has consistently shown that communicating in detail about these aspects of your course helps students succeed. The assumption of Needs Analysis (NA) is that the learner is at the heart of the teaching programme. It is therefore learner –centred rather than material – or teacher centred. Needs are often specified in terms of ends. Needs profiles or categories for any educational programme and language learning in particular are as follows:

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1. **Purpose Domain:** The purpose may be academic in which case the programme prepares learner for certain academic examinations: it may be occupational or professional in which case learners are trained towards achieving certain professional qualifications. Some purpose could be both academic and professional.
2. **Setting:** This states where the learning activities take place in terms of location such as a college, a university etc. the time it takes place and perhaps the duration of the programme.
3. **Interaction:** This involves statement about the roles of learners, their status, age, relationships with teacher and their peer group relations in and out of the classroom.
4. **Instrumentality:** In this, the type of language used for instruction are stated, that is whether only the spoken or the written mode is used, and the varieties- (standard or non-standard-used)
5. **Target level:** What level of linguistic competence or proficiency to be acquired needs to be stated.
6. **Dialect:** The type of dialects used should be stated. Make sure your syllabus course is accessible to students from diverse backgrounds and does not inadvertently make some feel excluded. For example, standard Igbo is used to teach in Igbo class instead of dialect despite numerous dialects in Igbo land.
7. **Communicative events:** The practical linguistic activities in which learners are to be engaged need to be explained. For instance learners might engage in verbal discussions, debates, excursions, workshop, seminars, micro-teaching and intercalary expressions.
8. **Communicative key:** This states the manner in which language is used in authoritative, formal or informal manner. Planning or designing language syllabus requires thorough needs analysis based on the above factors and many other considerations for an effective language programme. Needs analysis has however, been seriously criticised. It is argued that needs analysis is idealized because, according to the critics, it does not think about the real practical problems of the learners and that it says nothing on methodology nor does it take into account teaching variables like mismatch between content and means or between context and materials. It is constrained because specialist language teachers are not available in the right number and only specialist language teachers can carry out a thorough needs analysis. There are other more serious constrains such as socio-political, logistical, administrative, psycho pedagogic and external problems. Mulvey (1999), the exponent of NA presupposes homogeneous group forgetting that there are individual levels of proficiency in interest, motivation, age and attitude. It is therefore suggested that the only solution is to get the common core of needs and forget peripheral interests; and have specific goals for groups and individuals; state their present, future, felt and

externally demanded needs. Next, we will discuss the various types of approaches available to course designers and the language assumptions they make. Distinct types of language teaching syllabi exist, and these different types may be implemented in various teaching situations. The paper shall discourse them under two headings which are; the product-oriented syllabus and the process- oriented syllabus.

### 1. **Product-oriented Syllabuses**

Also known as the synthetic approaches, these kinds of syllabuses emphasize the product of language learning and are prone to intervention from an authority.

### **The Structural / Grammatical Approach**

Historically, the most prevalent of syllabus type is perhaps the grammatical syllabus in which the selection and grading of the content is based on the complexity and simplicity of grammatical items. The learner is expected to master each structural step and add it to her grammar collection. As such the focus is on the outcomes or the product. A brief note on structural linguistic arose in the 1930s from the growing dissatisfaction with traditional grammar. The structuralists' views on the nature of language are that language is speech and it is a system of forms or element, items of which combine in certain regular ways to create sentences. Structural linguists describe the language without any recourse to meaning. Language was seen as a system of arbitrary conventional, vocal symbols and meant for communication. Structural linguists see language description as strongly empirical and inductive in approach. Their analysis of language is taxonomic and has no appeal to meaning. Critics describe the above kind of analysis as too fragmentary on morphology but weak on syntax, and its partial description fails to reveal the infinite capacity which language has for creating new sentences.

The grammatical syllabus itself has the following characteristics:

- It concerns the grammatical demands of the users of the target language, especially how they express themselves.
- It believes that language is a grammatical system and that learning involves learning that system.
- The grammar is context-free, that is , the unit is the isolated sentence unrelated to social semiotics.
- It assumes that the essential problem for the learner is to master the linguistic form; social meaning and use being of secondary importance.
- It assumes that knowledge of grammatical code equals ability to use that code.
- Learning may not need the whole grammar in order to communicate.
- A purely grammatical syllabus presents linguistic items to the exclusion of other elements of the language and presents them in an inefficient manner. The effect is that learners are not sufficiently motivated.

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- The philosophical position adopted in relation to human learning was mechanistic.
- The psychology of the behaviourist school- (Bloomfield, Pavlov. Thorndike, Skinner, Hull, etc.)- provided the model of learning.
- Language learning was achieved by building up Habits on the basis of S-R chains.
- Habits are built up by unremitting practice- drills, repetition and pattern practice.
- Language learning is a stimulus- response association.

### **Critique of the Structural / Grammatical Syllabus Design**

Serious objections have been raised by the cognitivists; Chomsky, Katz and Fodor and Lennerbourg. Chomsky in particular in his view of Skinner's verbal behavior destroyed the basis of skinner's verbal behavior destroyed the basis of skinner's behaviourism. According to Olaoye (1998:54), Chomsky postulates that:

1. Children do not merely imitate adult language, but that they have what is known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD).
2. A child's language structure is far different from adult language structure, and that the S-R learning model may be true of first language acquisition, especially child's generalization rules. Such utterances like "Daddy goed out", "I eated my foof", "the water is colding me" etc. demonstrate that learning is by analogy not by S-R alone, and children couldn't have heard these menaces from adult any way. The child thus constructs his own rule of grammar which he internalizes.
3. Children are not passive organisms; they form their own rules, generalize, discriminate and categorize their input for forming novel sentences.
4. Children can generate infinite sentences through recursiveness and embedding.
5. Children's language is innate and the child's mind is not a Tabula Rasa, according to Lock, Leibniz and Descartes.
6. Chomsky lashed out at Skinner that what goes on in the mind of the rat is more important than what is physically observed and at any rate, human is even more complex than the rat's mind.
7. Learning should not be solely concerned with the observables as there are many things that pass unnoticed in learning and the inner psyche of the child is an important factor in learning.

Another problem facing the syllabus designer pursuing a grammatical order to sequencing input is that the ties connecting the structural items maybe rather feeble. A more fundamental criticism is that the grammatical syllabus focuses on only one aspect of language, namely grammar, whereas in truth there exist many more aspects to language. Finally, recent corpus based research suggests that there is a divergence between the grammar of the spoken and of the written language; raising implications for the grading of content in grammar based syllabuses.

### **The Situational Approach**

These limitations led to an alternative approach where the point of departure became situational needs rather than grammatical units. Here, the principal organizing characteristic is a list of situations which reflects the way language and behavior are used every day outside the classroom. Thus, by linking structural theory to situations the learner is able to induce the meaning from a relevant context.

The situationalists accept the contemporary view of language as a communication code and that language is used by people to do things to denote, locate name, label, describe etc. In terms of language description, the situationalists follow whatever grammar that is readily available and this implies structural grammar. On language learning, habit formation is encouraged and this implies some sort of behaviourism. Linguistic items have to be learnt and manipulated; an echo of the structuralist approach, though with a little difference as sentence patterns are introduced by recreating in the classroom natural situations for saving those sentences. Under language teaching materials which are aural- oral in approach, new materials are first heard and spoken by learners before they read and write it. Actual presentation and practice make extensive use of realia. Role-play is encouraged in learning. The situational method shows an amazing amalgam of American structuralist grammar and behaviourist principles with European pragmatism and dynamic teaching method mainly derived from Palmer (1972).

One advantage of the situational approach is that motivation will be heightened since it is "learner- rather than subject-centered " (Wilkins.1976: 16). However, a situational syllabus will be limited for students whose needs were not encompassed by the situations in the syllabus. This dissatisfaction led Wilkins to describe notional and communicative categories which had a significant impact on syllabus design.

### **Characteristics of Situational Syllabus Design**

It tries to provide learner with knowledge and skill that he would need to deal with his social demands:

- The question it attempts to answer is when and where the learner would need the target language.
- The syllabus specifies the situation in which language takes place.
- It assumes that language consists of patterns of social use and language in social context or situation.
- It takes the setting of the use of language-type of interaction involved as primary and takes linguistic forms as dependent on social situations.
- Linguistic items are chosen on the probability or likelihood of their occurrence in a particular social context.

### **Criticisms**

- Situational method assumes that syllabus designers are always able to predict situations in which the learner would find himself.
- It assumes that the components of the concept “situational” has been exhaustively listed and their inter-relationships mapped out.
- It also assumes that there is some predictable relationship between the social context on the one hand and the language used in that context on the other hand.
- Situational syllabuses are grammatical syllabuses which make use of situations to present and practice linguistic forms.

### **The Notional/Functional Approach**

Wilkins' criticism of structural and situational approaches lies in the fact that they answer only the 'how' or 'when' and 'where' of language (Brumfit and Johnson. 1979:84). Instead, he enquires "what is it they communicate through language"? Thus, the starting point for a syllabus is the communicative purpose and conceptual meaning of language i.e. notions and functions, as opposed to grammatical items and situational elements which remain but are relegated to a subsidiary role.

In order to establish objectives, the needs of the learners will have to be analyzed by the various types of communication in which the learner has to confront. Consequently, needs analysis has an association with notional-functional syllabuses. Although needs analysis implies a focus on the learner, critics of this approach suggest that a new list has replaced the old one. Where once structural/situational items were used a new list consisting of notions and functions has become the main focus in a syllabus. White (1988:77) claims that "language functions do not usually occur in isolation" and there are also difficulties of selecting and grading function and form. Clearly, the task of deciding whether a given function (i.e. persuading), is easier or more difficult than another (i.e. approving), makes the task harder to approach.

Notional syllabus is a fully analytic syllabus which presents a complete contrast to grammatical syllabus as it takes semantic knowledge as primary in language learning. Its characteristics are known by its views on the nature and description of language:

### **Characteristics of Notional Syllabus Design**

- It believes that language is a system of meanings rather than forms. It rests on a functional view of the nature of language.
- It rests on a cognitive view of language learning as posited by Chomsky and others.
- It has a fresh approach to language teaching based on sociolinguistic orientation.
- It concentrates on answering questions such as “what meaning are there?” “How do users express them?”
- Notional syllabus seeks correlation between forms and functions or forms and meanings.

- It attempts to define the communication needs of the learner and to display ways in which each communication need can be appropriately expressed.
- It is concerned with communicative competence of the language users.
- It assumes that language in context is language in use and that forms which are taught in isolation is language in usage.
- Linguistic content is planned around semantic demands.
- It concerns issues of appropriacy, pronunciation, tone and intonation.
- It is more of a functional thing than a theoretical one: it puts in request, asking for information, complaining, directing, instructing etc.
- The meaning of utterance derives from the entire context of its use.
- It derives from a range of functionalist input from linguistics, philosophy and the human sciences.
- Meaning is in the forefront of syllabus designer, and learning a language is now seen as learning “how to mean” in a wide range of social settings.
- The emphasis on meaning has had the effect of concentrating attention on the learners’ needs, and this has given fresh impetus to the design of course for specific, often job-related purposes.
- Learners learn how to do things with words- to warn, command, abuse, praise, persuade, dissuade, criticize, mock and pray etc.

### **Criticisms**

The notional syllabus is however not faultless. It has been criticised on the following grounds that:

- The methodology of presenting the language content is not mentioned. Do we use direct, deductive, inductive method and with what kinds of drills?
- It is atomistic-for instance, one is not told how grammatical bits or notional isolates to be made into a whole.
- Communicative competence is not just a compilation of forms but a set of strategies for realising elements in context of use.

The above approaches belong to the product-oriented category of syllabuses. An alternative path to curriculum design would be to adopt process oriented principles, which assume that language can be learnt experientially as opposed to the step-by-step procedure of the synthetic approach.

### **2. Process-oriented Syllabuses**

Process-Oriented Syllabuses, or the analytical approach, developed as a result of a sense of failure in product-oriented courses to enhance communicative language skills. It is a process rather than a product. That is, focus is not on what the student will have accomplished on completion of the program, but on the specification of learning tasks and activities that s/he will undertake during the course.

### **Procedural/Task-based Approaches**

According to Rabbin (2002), (Prabhu's (1987) 'Bangalore Project' is a classic example of a procedural syllabus. Here, the question concerning 'what' becomes subordinate to the question concerning 'how'. The focus shifts from the linguistic element to the pedagogical, with an emphasis on learning or learner. Within such a framework the selection, ordering and grading of content is no longer wholly significant for the syllabus designer. Arranging the program around tasks such as information- and opinion-gap activities, it was hoped that the learner would perceive the language subconsciously whilst consciously concentrating on solving the meaning behind the tasks. There appears to be an indistinct boundary between this approach and that of language teaching methodology, and evaluating the merits of the former remain complicated.

A task-based approach assumes that speaking a language is a skill best perfected through practice and interaction, and uses tasks and activities to encourage learners to use the language communicatively in order to achieve a purpose. Tasks must be relevant to the real world language needs of the student. That is, the underlying learning theory of task based and communicative language teaching seems to suggest that activities in which language is employed to complete meaningful tasks, enhances learning.

### **Learner-led Syllabuses**

The notion of basing an approach on how learners learn was proposed by Breen and Candlin (1984). Here the emphasis lays with the learner, who it is hoped will be involved in the implementation of the syllabus design as far as that is practically possible. By being fully aware of the course they are studying it is believed that their interest and motivation will increase, coupled with the positive effect of nurturing the skills required to learn.

However, as suggested earlier, a predetermined syllabus provides support and guidance for the teacher and should not be so easily dismissed. Critics have suggested that a learner-led syllabus seems radical and utopian in that it will be difficult to track as the direction of the syllabus will be largely the responsibility of the learners. Moreover, without the mainstay of a course book, a lack of aims may come about. This leads to the final syllabus design to be examined; the proportional approach as propounded by Yalden (1987).

### **The Proportional Approach**

The proportional syllabus basically attempts to develop an "overall competence" (Yalden, 1987:92). It consists of a number of elements with theme playing a linking role through the units. This theme is designated by the learners. It is expected

initially that form will be of central value, but later, the focus will veer towards interactional components; the syllabus is designed to be dynamic, not static, with ample opportunity for feedback and flexibility. The shift from form to interaction can occur at any time and is not limited to a particular stratum of learner ability. As Yalden (1987:87) observes, it is important for a syllabus to indicate explicitly what will be taught, "not what will be learned". This practical approach with its focus on flexibility and spiral method of language sequencing leading to the recycling of language seems relevant for learners who lack exposure to the target language beyond the classroom. But how can an EFL teacher pinpoint the salient features of the approaches discussed above.

### **The Communicative Syllabus Design**

The communicative syllabus design is a modern, eclectic approach which is concerned with how to combine social appropriateness with consideration for linguistic forms. It has the followings;

#### **Types or Communicative Syllabus Design**

1. **Structural-Functional Syllabus:** In this type of design, form and function are separated in the syllabus. A good deal of forms is taught at the beginning and the teacher later moves to the teaching function. This is a good adaptation of structural syllabus which makes it more communicative for post beginners.
2. **Wilkins' (1974) Notional Syllabus:** Wilkins' notional aspect makes the course fresher, and revives the learners' interests and adds vitality to the teaching of structure. The teaching of structure is made more of a communicative process rather than structure in isolation right from the beginning. Communicative approach gives the learners the tool, which is the structure or form and the notions or function twined around the structure in real teaching.
3. **Semantic Syllable:** Its approach is analytic and synthetic and involves structuralist approach with pattern practice and drills. Language is seen as communication in use with dialogue in authentic situations. It aims at communicative competence and it is based on notions of functions and the learners' needs especially requesting, apologising, complaining, directing, advising etc.

#### **Uses of Syllabus Design**

The syllabus serves many purposes for the students and teachers, the most basic of which is to communicate the instructor's course design (e.g goals, organisation, policies, expectations, requirements) to students. Other functions commonly served by syllabus include:

- To convey the enthusiasm for the topic and the expectations for the course.
- To show how this course fits into a broader context.

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- To establish a contract with students by publicly stating policies, requirements, and procedures for the course.
- To set the tone for the course and convey how they perceive their role as the teacher and their role as students.
- To help students assess their readiness for the course by identifying prerequisite areas of knowledge.
- To help students manage their learning by identifying outside resources and/or providing advice.
- To communicate the course goals and content to colleagues.

Syllabus also includes the followings; ensuring a fair and impartial understanding between the instructor and students such that there is minimal confusion on policies relating to the course, setting clear expectations of material to be learned, behaviour in the classroom and effort on students behalf to be put into the course, providing a roadmap of course organization/ direction relying on the instructors teaching philosophy to the students and providing a marketing angle of the course so that students may choose early in the course such that subject material is attractive.

Many generalized items of a syllabus can be amplified in a specific curriculum to maximize efficient learning by clarifying student understanding of specified material such as grading policy, grading rubric, late work policy, locations and terms, other contact information for instructor and teaching assistant such as phone or email, materials required and / or recommended such as textbooks, assigned reading books, calculators (or other equipment) , lab vouches etc. outside resources for subject material assistance (extra curricular books, tutor locations, resource centres etc.). Important dates in course such as examinations and paper due-dates, tips for succeeding in mastering course content such as study habits and expected time allotment, suggested problems of applicable, necessary pre-requisites or co-requisites to current course, safety rules if appropriate and objectives of the course. Nunan (1988:63) stresses the importance of the syllabus as a “vehicle for expressing accountability and commitment. Within many courses concluding in an examination, syllabuses are used to ensure consistency between schools and that all teachers know what must be taught and what is not required (extraneous). Examinations can only test knowledge based on information included in the syllabus.

### **Conclusions**

Clearly, there is a vast amount of material to disseminate when considering syllabus design in language teaching and learning. The numerous approaches touched on here all offer valuable insights into creating and developing language program. The synthetic approaches of structuralism, situational and functional-notional all have objectives to be attained, a content to be processed and learnt. The foundations of the product syllabuses remain fundamentally similar, whereas the underlying assumptions

about language learning from the analytic approaches differ greatly: process type syllabuses assert that learning a language is transient and cannot be itemized; pedagogical procedure takes procedure over content.

Whether a syllabus is flexible or whether it is binding will depend mainly on the objective which is to be achieved. Most inexperienced teachers prefer a “rigid” syllabus which clearly prescribes everything that has to be done and how while experienced teachers on the other hand prefer both freedom and responsibility and therefore a syllabus which is more flexible. Of all, it has to be noted that the modern trend in language teaching is focused towards being learner-centred at all times.

### **Recommendations**

If the assumption about the nature of linguistics and language learning is one of “language and communication” according to (Richards and Rodgers 1986:69), then a syllabus based around activities and tasks which promote real and meaningful communication is recommended to be advantageous and should be applied. Consequently, the belief that learning is facilitated by activities that include real communication may be the most suitable belief to adopt in language classroom. Further, points to consider when critically reviewing a syllabus are the objectives of the course as well as the needs of the learners. Ultimately, and perhaps ideally, a hybrid syllabus will result purely due to pragmatic reasons. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987:51) suggest: It is wise to take an eclectic approach, taking what is useful from each theory, develop them and trusting also in the evidence of your own experience as a teacher. The complex teaching situation today requires that time be set aside and concerted effort be put into designing a syllabus which would be appropriate for the variables involved in the teaching-learning process. The priority in language teaching nowadays is communicative performance among an increased number of learners. Therefore the emphasis on syllabus design is justified so as to produce appropriate syllabus for the specific needs of the learners.

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