

## Concepts and Measurements for Designing an ESP Course

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### Abstract

*The study aims to examine certain issues for designing an ESP syllabus as well as to investigate the perceptions of the students and their teachers that concerning the present course and how challenges, which face both students and teachers, are to be solved based on suggestions and recommendations accordingly. It is an exploratory study, that is, to discover the aspects of evaluating a program by involving both teachers and students to express their issues and views. The researcher followed quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain his results in the form of validity and reliability of data. Therefore, he used three methods to collect the data, that is, questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation. The subjects of this study were of two types: the teachers who are either having experience in teaching ESP courses or teaching the current course (Commercial English) and the students who study diploma. The total number utilized in the study was fourteen teachers, twenty diploma students, and sixteen certificate students for the questionnaire. The interview, on the other hand, adopted four teachers, seven diploma students, and seven certificate students. The data obtained were analyzed using tables. The data collected by the questionnaire was analyzed through statistics (numbers) while the data collected by interview and classroom observation was analyzed in the form of descriptive interpretations. The findings of this study assured that the students face some problems at the polytechnic under the study such as the lack of some of the basic skills especially speaking skills. The study*

*recommended that have been stated by both teachers and students contributed a lot to the syllabus improvement.*

**Keywords:** concept, measurement, design, ESP, syllabus

## INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes, ESP, in short, is considered as a dynamic area in the field of English Language Teaching. Therefore, it witnessed changes in its interpretation due to the renewal of the modernized methods of teaching and techniques that have been developed through time in the educational field. The conception of ESP as identified by Robinson (1980), McDonough (1984), Hutchinson and Waters (1987) takes the conception of a restricted language or special register. Robinson (1980: 5) has mentioned another important aspect for ESP as focuses attention on the purpose of the learner. This idea has widely been realized by people as English has been developed and became very important to achieve a variety of purposes. English is widely used as the language of science, technology, and commerce (Mackay, 1978) and hence became an international language. For example, people in certain areas such as engineering, air-traffic controller, and medical need to know much about their specifications, and thus this attention is made into English. Where in ESP, attention takes its way towards learning English and its usages for achieving a diversity of purposes. Robinson (1980: 6) mentions that learning English is the way to the acquisition of some diversity skills and knowledge. Thus, the nature of the English language is considered as a means to accomplish certain goals and at the same time cannot be regarded as an end itself (Mackay, 1978).

The significance of an ESP program is that its learners are mostly (if not all) adults as mentioned by Mackay (1978), McDonough (1984), Robinson (1991). Referring to Robinson (1991), in her statements, she mentioned that the learners of ESP are not beginners; therefore, they have already studied English for General Purposes (EAP) in their early years of study. Furthermore, they know why they want to learn and what should be done to achieve certain purposes. Consequently, their prior needs shape as an important stage in the ESP course/program design. Needs analysis is an

important factor and can be ascertained as a pre-requisite for syllabus design (Munby, 1978, McDonough, 1984, Robinson, 1991, Waters, 1994). McDonough identifies this feature as follows:

‘the idea of analyzing the language needs of the learners as a basis for course development has become almost synonymous with ESP in recent years and it is difficult to think of one without the other coming in mind’. (McDonough, 1984: 29)

It is seen through McDonough’s identification of needs analysis, which should be taken into consideration before when a desire arises to design a course on one hand. On the other hand, the careful identification of needs analysis leads to answer any questions concerning this respect. The results of this study may shape an important aspect of course evaluation.

Commercial English (CE) is a subdivision of ESP, which has embraced great importance because of the invading technology in terms of business studies and the concerns of the world (world of business) that took large-scale. In this respect, Pickett (1989: 6) stated that Business English is considered as ‘a mediating language between the technicalities of particular business ...and the language of the general public’. He also added that ‘business and commerce are by definition an interface between the general public and the specialist producer ...’ (Pickett, 1989:6). The wide range of business courses has emerged in the last decade as a key knowledge of many learners. This variety of courses in business English created many professionals with specialized types of textbooks, which concerning the business, economics, or management. Therefore, the idea of designing textbooks meet the learners’ needs in their target situations, came to be an obvious feature of an ESP syllabus.

## **COURSE DESIGN IN ESP**

The purpose of this section is to recognize the current views towards syllabus design as well as to know the teachers’ issues, which related to their syllabus in terms of content, types, and functions. These issues will no doubt assist them to construct suitable programs upon it. They also help in creating better evaluations regarding programs and coursebooks at broad levels. Therefore, the concern of building syllabuses has met more attention in the area of ELT (English

Language Teaching), and hence a lot of theories and applications made to develop language learning through finding effective approaches that will meet learners' abilities.

The idea of building syllabuses in the past was to pay more attention to structure, functions, and notions, but through stages of development, the focus is on situations, topics, and tasks to enable learners to function effectively in their target situation. Nunan (1988: 52) proposes that 'the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology has become blurred.'

This section also deals with the 'steps' and the 'criteria' by which a syllabus can be designed. Taking a lot the status of the learners' needs analysis according to their needs, wants, the implication for future studies, and what is running in the 'teaching situation'

## **DEFINITION OF A SYLLABUS**

The term syllabus undergoes many interpretations through the years due to the different philosophies of syllabus developers. Therefore, it is used interchangeably with the curriculum as in U.S.A (White, 1988). Widdowson (1984) defines a curriculum as the whole set of schemes of conceptual organization and behavior conveyed through formal education while a syllabus defines a subject and 'provides a framework within which the actual process of learning must take place' (Widdowson, 1984:23). Allen shares the same views as Widdowson when he states that:

... (a) curriculum is a very general concept, which involves consideration of the whole complex of philosophical, social, and administrative factors that contribute to the planning of an educational program. Syllabus, on the other hand, refers to that subpart of the curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught (as distinct from how they will be taught, which is a matter for methodology. (Allen, 1984: 61)

As seen above, Allen (1984) defined curriculum as a general concept that engages philosophical, social, and administrative factors, which have to do with learning planning in the educational system. He defines the syllabus, to some extent, refers to the parts of a system to study.

The distinction between syllabus and curriculum also made by Nunan who summarizes that as follows:

Curriculum is concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs. Syllabus, on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content. (Nunan, 1988:8)

From the views introduced above, one can conclude that a syllabus is a subpart of a curriculum. While 'a curriculum contains a broad description of general goals' (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986:34), a syllabus specifies an outline of what is to be taught. For that reason, the objectives of a syllabus should, therefore, be in line with the overall goals of a curriculum. Now the distinction between the two became clear. It is important to comprehend the concept of the syllabus, that is, it can be defined narrowly or broadly. Within its narrow aspect, teaching methodology and evaluation are not part of the syllabus (Allen, 1984; Widdowson, 1984; Nunan, 1988). However, Candlin (1984:32) is not in favour of the narrow definition of the syllabus by introducing this statement 'whether it is possible to separate so easily what we have been calling content from what we have been calling method or procedure'. Yalden who argues that shares his broad view of 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 aim of the learner (as a social being and as an individual), and the activities which will take place in the classroom'. (Yalden, 1984:14)

Relatively, both aspects differ in some points and resemble in general notion. Both of them contribute to the three aspects of a syllabus (i.e. objectives, content, and arrangement of its item, Stern, 1984:5). The objectives of the syllabus are what aimed to be achieved by the end of the instruction, that is, the decisive goals (Brumfit, 1984). The content refers to the topics or subjects selected for each lesson while the sequential arrangements dealt with the organization of the items and in the form of gradation to language aspects.

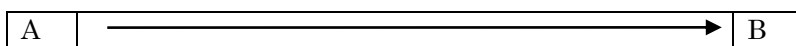
Thus my study took on the constricted approach to syllabus definition, concentrating on the content of the syllabus, its effectiveness, the arrangement of its items, and procedures are taken

to implement it. The study also looks at the actual classroom practice in terms of classroom observation.

Through my experience in the educational field, the syllabus can be defined as an educational record that accomplishes certain goals towards the learning process. The syllabus also defined as a system designed to accomplish a goal. As noticed here, there are four parameters: a system refers to many different parts working in unity; designed means based on certain criteria; accomplish means attain the success while a goal refers to what aimed to achieve. There is another definition, which says s syllabus is a document charges a route from point A to point B, meaning that A refers to the understanding of the needs analysis while B refers to the learners' behavior (Rajeswary, lecture 2005).

A: learner' situation Vis a Vis his learning based on Needs Analysis (NA).

B: Learners existed behavior Vis a Vis his learning needs.



**Table1:** explains the definition of syllabus introduced by lecture notes (Rajeswary, 2005)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 80) defined a syllabus as ‘a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learned.’ Yalden (1987: 87) defined a syllabus as a ‘summary of the content to which learners will be exposed.’

There is a bit of confusion between ‘Syllabus’ and ‘Curriculum’ in their definitions and use. The latest studies confirmed that there are no difference between the two (concepts) meanings. Accordingly, they carry the same meaning, contrary to British definition, which prefers using the word ‘syllabuses. Nevertheless, according to Stern (1983), the field of curriculum studies is part of the discipline of the educational system. This statement makes use of a sense that, curriculum considered an umbrella, and a syllabus is a part of it. Shaw’s (1975) survey of literature on second language syllabus development has brought distinction between the two concepts. He states that:

“... The curriculum includes the goals, objectives, content, processes, resources, and means of evaluation of all the learning experiences

planned for pupils both in and out of the school and community, through classroom instruction and related programs ...”

After this statement, he defined the syllabus by saying:

“a statement of the plan for any part of the curriculum, excluding the element of curriculum evaluation itself.”

Syllabus, as defined by Noss and Rodgers (1976), is “ a set of justifiable, educational objectives specified in terms of linguistics content” It is noticed here that the ‘specification of objectives’ implies language works, that is, how language is involved to attain certain purpose in the availability of its form, situations or as a means of performing social behavior.

The researcher, Strevens (1977) defines a syllabus in the following statement:

“ partly an administrative instrument, partly a day-to-day guide to the teacher, partly a statement of what is to be taught and how sometimes partly a statement of an approach ... The syllabus embodies that part of the language which is to be taught, broken down into items, or otherwise processed for teaching purposes.”

In Wilkins’ (1981) views, he considers syllabuses as “specifications of the content of language teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering to make teaching a more effective process.”

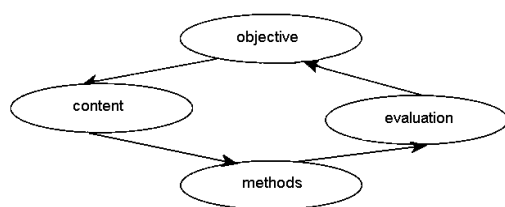
Johnson (1981) looks at a syllabus as an “organized syllabus inventory”. He means by ‘syllabus inventory’ the items of the content studied. Crombie (1985) also agrees with Johnson in his definition by looking at a syllabus as a list or inventory of items or units concern with the learning process. On the contrary, Corder (1975) explains furthermore in his statement by saying that the syllabus is more to do than just an inventory of items. In turn, Mackey (1980) says that a syllabus is a logical arrangement of items, selected rationally, with a specification of the content of learning.

Candlin (1984) provides a different opinion on syllabuses towards his statement as they are “social constructions, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners ...They are concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners.” A syllabus that defined in Breen’s (1984) words as “a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and

our students' learning" while Prabhu (1985) looks at its function as "to specify what is to be taught and in what order".

The following figure shows the main components of a syllabus: objectives, content, methods, and finally evaluation. The objectives of the syllabus reflect the target needs through which specific programs established to achieve its goals. Content refers to the items/topics designed to meet certain needs that require the application to accomplish the goals via specific techniques (methods) by which instructors pass the information to learners, while evaluation is an attempt followed to see how the syllabus related to learners' abilities and serves the objectives of the program.

Four stages should be considered when designing a syllabus (Murphy, 1985), that is, objectives, content, methods or learning experiences, and evaluation. The diagram below shows the four stages:



**Figure (1): The four stages of syllabus design introduced by (Murphy, 1985)**

## **CLASSIFICATION OF SYLLABUSES**

The classification of syllabuses mainly based on different theories of language and language teaching. Accordingly, there appeared two types of schools of thought, one of the concerns with the teaching of language forms while the other regarding the teaching of language use. The former one is viewed in traditional language syllabuses, for example, those by Hornby, Lado, and Fries, which are known as 'linguistic syllabuses' Bloor (1984), identify what to be taught in linguistic terms. The latter is known as communicative syllabuses, in favor of the objectives given in the form of target activities (Herbolich, 1979) or learning tasks (Edge and Samuda, 1981). There are three forms of syllabuses as follows:



### **a. Structural syllabus**

The researchers named this type of syllabuses known as grammatical or linguistic syllabus. It means a traditional approach to language teaching. It is typical of what taught in the 1950s syllabus and its focus is on language forms with little concern to language use. The distinctiveness of this syllabus is that its learners are required to learn the language systems in the form of linguistic features (Johnson, 1982; Yalden, 1987). It is believed that to be competent in the language, learners must master the mechanisms by which the language works' (Johnson, 1982: 8). Therefore, it depends on the record of grammatical structures e.g. tenses, articles, singular, plural, etc. (Wilkins, 1976, Dublin and Olshtain, 1986) rather than on language meanings.

The content of the syllabus is product-oriented and learners learn the language only in the form of isolated parts of grammatical entries (Nunan, 1988). The organization of the coursebook items concentrates on a list of structures classified and rated from simple to complex. The criticisms done against this syllabus is that the mastering of these grammatical structures by language learners is not applied in conversation sequences due to the isolated parts i.e. formal grammar (Nunan, 1988) from their context, which violates communicative purposes. It is structural because it emphasizes teaching the structure and the vocabulary of the language, and it encourages students to make a comparison between their native language and the target language. It is traditional because it has a pre-designed content, it sets out what is to be taught and learned. Moreover, it is composed of a list of linguistic structures and a list of words. In this respect, Yalden stated the following:

... Even when we have described the grammatical and lexical meaning of a sentence, we still have not accounted for how it is used in an utterance... (Yalden, 1987a: 26)

### **b. Notional Functional Syllabus**

This type developed because of the criticisms against the structural syllabus in the 1970s. It goes about two terms, function, and notion. The first one is described as 'communicative purposes for which we use language' and the second one, 'the conceptional meaning expressed through language' (Nunan, 1988: 35). The focus is on

language meanings rather than on language structures (structural syllabus).

The designer of this type of syllabus concentrates on what the purposes needed to communicate through language (Wilkins, 1976). Therefore, communication is through meaning to exchange views and not in isolated words or sentences. It is functional because it gives priority to the needs of the students and takes the desired 'communicative capacity' as a starting point, and what is more, its organization is not determined solely by grammatical considerations but considers communicative categories. Since it is a combination of different syllabuses, it is concerned with both accuracy and fluency. Wilkins adds:

The whole basis of a notional approach to language teaching devices from the conviction that what people want to do through language is more important than mastery of the language as an unapplied system. (Wilkins, 1976: 42)

Needs analysis is the way towards understanding the need for learners to communicate. Wilkins defines notional syllabus as: "... any strategy of language teaching that derives the content of learning from an initial analysis of the learner's need to express such meanings". (Wilkins, 1976:23)

In line with Wilkins' expression, it is clear that the specification of learning strategy made through a learner's desire to communicate and hence to convey meanings in connected content, that is, the content is prepared according to meaning that the learners desire to convey. Therefore, the learners learn in the lesson, for example, the notion and function of time (present simple, past simple, etc.) in the form of indirectly related events as well as a description with functional marker concerning point of time.

### **c. Communicative Syllabus**

Munby's Communicative Syllabus Design (1978) came out due to the rise of interest placed on communicative competence that represented by sociolinguists such as Halliday (1970) and Hymes (1972). Halliday looks at language in terms of use, that is, for communicative events. He declares 'we all use language as a means of organizing other people, and directing their behavior' (Halliday, 1970: 14). He identifies three language functions: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the

contextual. Hymes (1972) agrees that language linked to social life. Thus the more acquisition of language competence, the more mastering of language use. It is situational because it realizes the importance that different social situations may need different features of the language. He explains more saying that the normal child: ‘... acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. (Hymes, 1972: 277)

He goes further by describing that ‘there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless’ (Hymes, 1972:278). He later suggests four segments in his notion of communicative competence: formerly possible, sufficient, and appropriate and performed. Similarly, Munby (1978) recognizes the need to focus on language use when he says,

What is needed is a theoretical framework that stems from a sociolinguistic view of knowledge and communication, where the contextual or environmental factors, which constrain competence or are involved in the development of communicative competence or the realization of meaning potential, are predominantly sociocultural. (Munby, 1978:21)

## **FRAMEWORK FOR REVISING AN EXISTING SYLLABUS**

As claimed that a set of questions have been drawn about the syllabus, regarding that, the start from the beginning, seems to be difficult rather than examining and modifying the offered syllabus at the same time, because of the former needs great efforts to know the learners’ needs analysis, which seems to be difficult. Knowing the changes in needs leads to the consideration of what done and what has not can well help in deciding goals and objective modification, content selection, and sequencing (Yalden, 1987, P. 99).

### **a. Content selection and gradation**

As far as the contents are concerned, the syllabus considered a well-developed and rich syllabus. However, as White stated, the more elements included and specified in a syllabus, the richer it is, the richer the syllabus, the less choice given to the teacher and learner. (White, 1988 P. 92)

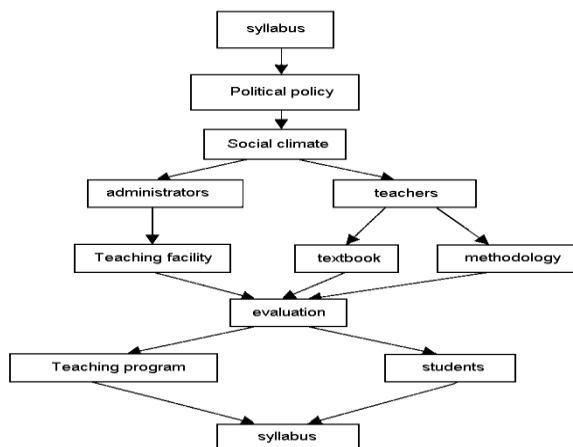


Figure (2): The implementation of a syllabus (White, 1988)

### b. Suggestions for improvement

The syllabus is a well-developed item of a language and must include both language structure and function, emphasizing fluency as well as accuracy. Moreover, it contains many elements. Therefore, it is restrictedly rigid and leaves hardly any space for adaptation, improvisation, and growth (White, 1988: 92).

A syllabus must aim to develop different language skills competence: speaking ability, which deserves more attention; the rest are listening, reading, and writing. Students might opt for different levels of performance in the four skills and then move to Para skills, for different individuals often have different needs and wants. So, it is not necessary to achieve uniformity. If some students want to develop speaking or translating, they should be encouraged. The syllabus intends to be a continuation of what students have learned in high school. Yet there are still many repetitions due to the strong desire of completion and perfection in systemic teaching of vocabulary and grammar, etc.

The syllabus must undergo validity and reliability to function well towards its role. Though it has clarified that students should study per their aptitude, the options are not enough to cover such a huge gap. Consequently, some requirements might be too high for some students but too low for other students. For instance, the vocabulary requirement is low for some key university students but too high for students from some areas. Listening and speaking are

high in the general term; even students of English majors will need more effort to reach such goals.

Evaluation should consist of two aspects: to evaluate or test the students in the program, and to assess the teaching as well as the over-all course program. The syllabus seems to neglect the second aspect, which is as significant as the first. Some inventories like Functional & Notional Category and Language Skills appeal only to very limited teachers who are to write textbooks. A big majority of teachers and students tend to ignore them. In its development, the syllabus revising the most important step to guide the stakeholders to function well towards manipulating problems that arise on the surface and alert them of such defects.

## **CONCLUSION**

The task for the ESP developer is to ensure that all three of these abilities integrated into the curriculum. This is a difficult task due to the incredible amount of research required. Close collaboration between content experts and the curriculum developer must be possible during the development stages for the curriculum. In retrospect, the experience and knowledge would have lessened the workload in this area tremendously. Fortunately, there exists a wealth of information on academic and general language skills. The trick involved in the interweaving process is to develop a model that best integrates the restricted repertoire with the academic and general for the learners in question. Since ESP requires comprehensive needs analysis and because the learning-centered approach is not static, it is impossible to expect that the developer is in a position to identify the perfect balance of the abilities for any particular group of learners. In reality, a large part of this responsibility is that of the instructors who are in the best position to identify changing learner needs and who are in the best position to ensure that all students receive a balanced language.

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