RETURNING FULL CIRCLE: A SURVEY OF EFL SYLLABUS DESIGNS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract

As the linguistic attention of the ELT academic community continues to move away from the concerns of second language syllabi designs found in CLT or Task-based learning, there are questions among many as to what form the current paradigm shift will take as we approach the next century. This paper reviews several of the issues currently surrounding today's second language syllabus designs, and offers a forecast of language syllabus designs expected to rise and fall in the years to come. It is felt that, by reviewing where we have been, important clues may be found as to where we may be going in the next few years as an academic community.

Introduction

As we approach the start of the 21st century, English language teaching (ELT) is experiencing a significant paradigm shift. A primary reason for this stems from the decline in recent years of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Starting as early as the 1980's, some began to question the relevance of CLT for second language learning (Swan 1985). Today the rate of CLT's disintegration has reached the point to where it has become increasingly marginalized

by linguists and influential second language educators. Jennings and Doyle (1996:169) state that CLT as an approach has been the platform for " . . . unprincipled eclecticism, varying from teacher to teacher." Shortall (1996) points out that so many approaches have been labelled as "communicative", it has become impossible to define what Communicative Language Teaching actually means. Skehan (1996:30) 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", and Batstone (1995) warns that CLT's unbalanced approach to language teaching may lead to the early fossilization of learners' language skills.

Language teachers can be forgiven for feeling betrayed by an ELT establishment which, just a few years ago, vigorously supported CLT. Sheen (1994:127) reflects the sentiment of many when he writes, " . . . frequent paradigm shifts . . . have not resulted in significant progress in language learning." Others though (Richard-Amato 1988, Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty 1985, Widdowson 1979) see paradigm shifts as necessary for minimizing the extremes and building upon the strengths of innovative second language syllabi. What is unique about the current paradigm shift however is that no new syllabus design, not even the Task-Based syllabus, has effectively replaced CLT. The result has been several years of intense soul-searching on the part of teachers as they seek to redefine their roles as language educators (Nunan and Lamb 1996, Richards and Lockhart 1994).

1.1 Objectives

In the interim period between the decline of CLT and the rise of other syllabi on the horizon, it is an opportune time for language teachers to reconsider the nature of syllabus design for ELT. This paper considers several of the issues currently surrounding today's second language syllabus designs, and offers a forecast of language

syllabus designs expected to rise and fall in the years to come. By reviewing where we have been, important clues may be found as to where we may be going as an academic community. We will begin first by defining some important terms and concepts.

1.2 Definitions

Questions often 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 are used in North America to mean a teacher's requirements for a particular course. Nunan (1993:8) defines *curriculum* " . . . as concerned with the planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs." This definition finds general acceptance among many applied linguists (cf. Stern, 1992:20, and Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985).

The term *syllabus* has been a much more difficult concept to define. 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 (1990:127).

Nunan (1993:8) sees a syllabus as a process that " . . . focus[es] more narrowly on the selection of grading and content." Candlin (1984) defines a syllabus as a means for encouraging learners to challenge the pedagogic ideologies and views of reality that the syllabus designer brings to the class. 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 (1983:14).

Brumfit (1984:75) defines a syllabus as . . . a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds and so is negotiable and adjustable." Richards, Platt and Weber (1985:289) describe a . . . syllabus which is organised around tasks, rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary." Long and Crookes (1993:9-10) state that a 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.

My position is that a syllabus represents and endorses the adherence to some set of sociolinguistic beliefs regarding power, education and cognition. It is a political manifesto because it reveals the designers' views on authority and status. In one manner or another, cooperation is encouraged through receiving some sort of benefit (good grades, encouragement, cross-cultural discoveries, etc.), while restrictions await those who are out of sync (denial of credentials, reduced job opportunities, limited knowledge of those outside one's language group, etc.). Syllabus as a concept is also a philosophical statement about learning and cognition. Certain methods for teaching and learning will be upheld as beneficial, based upon the syllabus designers' beliefs about how people think and learn. Partly because it is not as observable as a curriculum or class, the term *syllabus* is more abstract than is commonly supposed. Nevertheless, 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 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

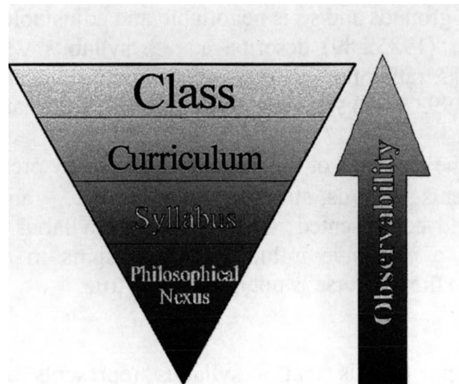

Figure One

2. 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 (Yalden 1987:120-137). 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. Type A syllabi deal with *what* should be learned in a second language classroom. The emphasis is upon subject and content. Course objectives are determined 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 testing format 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 type B.

Wilkins (1976) separates 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 (1976:2).

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 (Wilkins 1976:13).

It can be concluded that analytic syllabi, so to speak, look at the

forest, while synthetic syllabi look at the trees. Long and Crookes (1993:11-12) 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." Wilkins (1976:1-2) described analytic and synthetic syllabi as proportional. Syllabi that bolster second language curricula are never completely analytic or synthetic in nature.

While these theories on the nature of syllabus design are usually dealt with separately, they are equally helpful and should as such be viewed rather as an organic unit. The total relationship of White, Wilkins and Long & Crookes' ideas is shown in Figure Two.

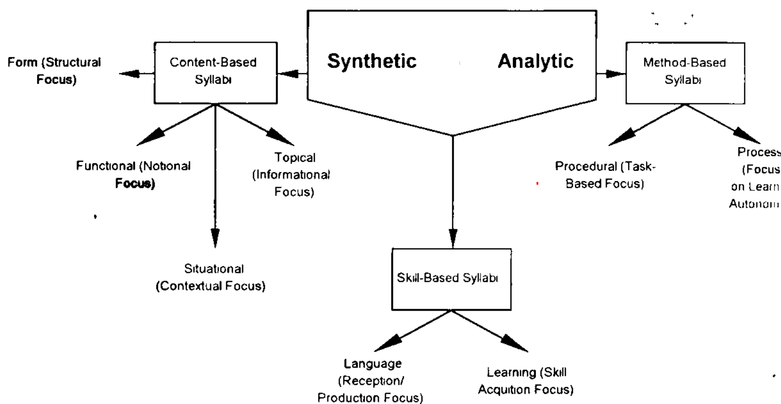

Figure Two

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.

2.1 Relative Strengths and Weaknesses of Basic Syllabus Designs

Due to the complexity of teaching a foreign language, any syllabus design 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 textbooks and materials for them. Many teachers like this syllabus design because it is logical, organized and can provide 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 outside TEFL. It is reassuring for students because they can know to a greater degree what will be expected to memorize. Language can be broken down into comprehensible bits so 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, some 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 (1988:110).

Almost every applied linguist takes joy in poking holes in Type A synthetic syllabi. Long and Crookes (1993:27) 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. 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 linear process. But Willis (1995) is quick to point out:

> All that we know about the way people learn languages 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.

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 (1995) continues

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

Willis rightly maintains that Type A syllabi actually 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* across Asia. Such an approach may fit closer with the internal syllabus and philosophical nexus of influential educators, and, ultimately, the society.

Type B analytic syllabi, on the other hand, take the concerns of the learners into deeper consideration and seem more focused upon the business of learning rather than teaching. Candlin (1984:36) 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. Type B syllabi take different learning styles, rates of second language comprehension and cognitive development into consideration. Often they seek to somehow merge these factors together during the course of study. To use the analogy of a journey, Type A synthetic syllabi are similar to a package tour with the teacher as tour guide. Type B analytic syllabi are closer to a trip in which a group of friends who 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 determines 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 (1988:97).

Some SLA researchers suggest that Type B analytic syllabi appear more compatible with many language learners' internal syllabi (Bailey 1980, Bailey et al. 1974). 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 meaning in the classroom, to the exclusion of any deliberate regulation of the development of grammatical competence or a mere simulation of language behavior (1987:2).

Yet while many researchers praise the potential of Type B syllabi, few openly advocate its use. Kouraogo (1987) 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. Nunan (1993:44) asserts that Type B syllabi do not attempt to bring the learning processes to any satisfying result.

At least for the Japanese ELT context, doubts about the Type B syllabus may be warranted. Griffee (1995) described his experiment with process and procedural syllabi at Seigakuin University. 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 (Griffee 1995:17).

Hadley (1998) also reports problems with using Type B syllabi. He experimented with a learner-centered, process syllabus for over two years at Japan's Niigata University. Two-thirds of the classes in the study suffered a significant loss of class time while students came to 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. While one class in the study was very successful in terms of forming clearly defined goals, focused lessons, high attendance, enthusiastic learning and greater time spent using English, it developed a dark side. The rest of the class ostracized students who passively refused to participate, and peer pressure eventually caused one to angrily drop out of the course.

White warns that abdicating control of the course to immature, unmotivated learners creates the risk of a non-learning experience – an EFL class that 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 (1988:102).

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 find it difficult to argue against such a pragmatic solution (1988:111).

Martin (1997:4) adds that an eclectic approach is not only common sense, it is . . . the best available choice since variety is the spice of language." Ultimately an eclectic approach to syllabus design is probably the most logical, but only if it is an *informed* choice. One cannot use the term "eclectic" as a pretty façade for unprofessionalism.

3 Future Trends in EFL Syllabus Designs

In terms of syllabus design, the EFL academic community periodically sways from one extreme to another. Before the 1970's, structural syllabi based upon grammatical form were prevalant throughout the world. Gradually, a move took place away from structural syllabi towards a focus on the communicative aspects of the language and on learner autonomy. This arguably reached its climax in the early 1990's. Now that it appears that the pendulum is swinging back towards a focus on form and structure, some of the syllabus designs that are presently receiving attention may be destined to fade in the near future, while others are expected to increase in prestige.

3.1 Taking Task to Task

At present, considerable attention has been devoted to the Task-Based syllabus, with an impressive corpus of literature to support the claim of its potential for second language learning (cf. Nunan 1993, Long and Crookes 1993, Gatbonton and Gu 1994). However, the problems with the task-based syllabus in its current form are the same as those in CLT: a difficulty to define *task*, unbridled eclecticism, and the risk of interlingual fossilization.

Questions arise as to how to best define the "task" in task-based learning. Kumaravadivelu's (1993) literature survey of over thirteen scholarly books and articles revealed that none could agree on the best way to define a task. He concludes that

> ... *task* remains an entity that defies clear terminological, conceptual and methodological understanding because of the indiscriminate, nondescript use of the term. A close reading of the current literature on task-based pedagogy makes it difficult to determine a set of governing principles or even defining criteria commonly shared by all (pg. 69).

It is this difficulty in defining the nature of task-based learning that has contributed to a large number of approaches being labeled as "task-based." Chaudron's (1988) research of task-based studies shows there has been such a broad understanding of what was understood as a task by classroom teachers that until a greater consensus is formed on what makes up task-based learning, it will be difficult to make any claims as to its effectiveness.

In some cases, what is normally called *task-based* appears actually to be a collection of controlled fluency exercises taken from the Notional-Functional syllabus and Communicative Language Teaching (see, for example, see Nunan's (1995) *Atlas* textbook series). While such an approach may promote a certain level of fluency, there is always the risk that an overemphasis on fluency will allow students to rely on lexical chunks for the majority of their communication, without really progressing in their second language ability. Skehan warns:

> The central problem for the foreign language learner, taught by task-based means, is that learners operate under the pressure of time and under the need to get meanings across. These strategies provide an effective incentive for learners to make the best use of the language they already have. But they do not encourage a focus on form. They do not provide an incentive for structural change towards an interlanguage system with greater complexity. The advantages of such an approach are greater fluency and the capacity to solve communication problems. But these advantages may be bought at too high a price if it compromises continued language growth and interlanguage development (1993:22).

These issues tend to support the view that Task-Based Learning has more in common with the pedagogic concerns of the presently declining paradigm in ELT. If they are not effectively dealt with, it is believed that the Task-Based Methodology will rapidly decline sometime early in the next century.

3.2 The Return to Form

Perhaps as a response to these weaknesses, in recent years there has been a discernable drift toward reintroducing form and topicality back into second language learning. For beginning learners, many have expressed a renewed interest in Pedagogic Grammar (PG). Yamamoto-Wilson's (1997:6) view is one that is receiving growing support within the ELT 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?

Proponents for PG are calling neither 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. Most of them involve some form of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which has already enhanced the use of interactive multimedia packages and e-mail in some countries (Bauman 1998, Wakao and Nelson 1997). Also related to this are significant developments in the area of corpus linguistics that have given birth to Data-Driven Learning (Johns 1994). "Data-Driven" means that discoveries made from computer analysis of text suggest the direction for teaching and learning. Using a computer program called a *concordancer*, teachers and learners can study large text files of books, articles and transcripts of spoken data. This data, which is called a *corpus* or *corpora*, is often quite large – ranging from 10 million to up to 250 million words. The advantage this has for students and teachers is that they can study authentic language as it actually occurs. A major weakness of earlier syllabus designs is they often presented an idealized language forms that were rarely, if ever, found outside the classroom. The work presently underway in corpus linguistics

suggests that hard data can supplement human insight. The computer cannot think for us, but it can present the regular patterns that arise in the language, thus providing new avenues of discovery for students.

There is a growing number of published reports on how DDL is fueling the current need among language teachers for authentic grammatical examples (Aston 1995, Flowerdew 1996, Murison-Bowie 1996). Because of the newness of this approach, however, little work has been done on how to use corpora with beginners. Neither have there been any suggestions yet as to how to make DDL flexible for the needs of students and teachers in countries with disparate levels of technology. Time will tell if DDL will receive greater acceptance and add greater validity to new structural syllabi. Nevertheless this is a movement in ELT in which we are certain to see continued progress.

If the recent developments in Japan are any indication of what is being attempted or discussed elsewhere, there have been increasing calls for the creation of content courses that teach other subjects (such as math, science, or social studies) in English. Variations on the theme of content courses are being formed in colleges and universities across Japan. Schools that are not yet prepared to completely switch over to English as the main medium of instruction are still forming new courses that have been proposed by a plethora of Special Interest Groups. These promote topics such as global awareness, gender issues, or cross-cultural understanding (Beebe 1998, Cates 1997). Much of the curriculum reform currently underway in Japanese universities follows the worldwide trend of spending less time learning *about* English and spend more time learning *in* English. The syllabus design behind these curricula reforms appears to be Topical, Situational or Content-Based in nature. Explicit language learning at these schools is beginning to take a secondary role to the transfer of information. As one curriculum developer in Japan writes, " . . . the main objective is to help students master content material. Language learning is incidental" (Poulshock 1995:9).

4 Conclusion

Not only is change a constant in ELT, it is also cyclical. Soon after the beginning of next century, it is expected that the dominant ELT syllabus designs will have returned full circle. We will likely see a continued shift away from analytic, learner-based or skill-based syllabi in favor of synthetic content-based syllabi. The popularity of syllabi such as CLT and Task-Based Learning is anticipated to decline while interest in lexical, structurally based syllabi will flourish. Language classes will also see a greater emphasis on the topical, ideological concerns of curriculum planners. As curricula in various educational institutions begin to reflect these changes, some teachers may be challenged to rethink their assumptions about language learning, and as always, make eclectic decisions based upon the real life needs of their students.

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