The various types of syllabi and the host of related issues in the field of second language teaching and course development manifest the significance of syllabus design as one of the most controversial areas of second language pedagogy. Teachers should be familiar with different types of syllabuses and be able to critically analyze them. Issues in Syllabus Design addresses the major types of syllabuses in language course development and provides readers with the theoretical foundations and practical aspects of implementing syllabuses for use in language teaching programs. It starts with an introduction to the concept of syllabus design along with its philosophical foundations and then briefly covers the major syllabus types from a historical perspective and pedagogical significance: the grammatical, situational, skill-based, lexical, genre-based, functional notional, content, task-based, negotiated, and discourse syllabus.

This volume helps teachers to be familiar with different types of syllabuses and enables them to critically analyze different syllabus types.
Issues in Syllabus Design
CRITICAL NEW LITERACIES: THE PRAXIS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING (PELT)

Volume 6

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Issues in Syllabus Design

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PREFACE

The diverse assortment of syllabuses and the host of related issues in the field of second language teaching and course development make it evident that syllabus design is one of the most controversial areas of second language pedagogy. The implementation of syllabuses for use in specific language teaching programs inter alia may include issues related to the structuring of the units, the methodology used to convey the content, and the format, presentation and assessment of the content. The differences in content and theoretical grounding of various types of syllabi do signify a common concern: Teachers should be familiar with different types of syllabuses and be able to critically analyse them. Thus, this book addresses the major types of syllabuses in language course development.

The chapters in this book are brought together to provide BA and MA university students a comprehensive overview of the old and new approaches to syllabus design. In Chapter 1, Murphy provided an introduction to the concept of syllabus design and briefly covered five major syllabus types from a historical perspective and pedagogical significance: the Grammatical Syllabus, the Notional-Functional Syllabus, the Lexical Syllabus, the Task-Based Syllabus, and the Content-based Syllabus. In the second chapter, Maftoon and Safdari took a comprehensive look at the history of educational philosophies which were touched chronologically and included Idealism, Realism, Perenialism, Essentialism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Progressivism, Experimentalism, Reconstructionism, and postmodernism. Through grasping such a sketch of philosophical ideas, they attempted to answer the question which idea should be taken as an appropriate foundation of a language teaching curriculum. They came up with Kumaravadivelu’s idea of principled pragmatism which holds that postmethod pedagogy is based on three dimensions of particularity, practicality, and possibility. Therefore, Maftoon and Safdari recommended practitioners and theorizers a glocalized view instead of a global view. Rather than focusing on a one-fits-all approach, a localized view promotes tailoring global approaches and philosophies to fit the specific situation, learners, and teachers.

Wette, in Chapter 3, focused on the famous dichotomy of product/process-based types of curriculum. After elaborating on the distinctions between these syllabuses, she continued with the critiques of both. Wette believed that mostly the syllabuses focus on the final product of any teaching and learning; however, process-based syllabuses can be mingled to the whole curriculum to help teachers and learners to focus on enhancing skills through a step by step process.

Faravani and Zeraatipishe, in Chapter 4, provided an introduction to the grammatical syllabus along with its major critiques. As an alternative to grammatical syllabus, Birjandi and Naeini introduced situational syllabus in Chapter 5. Having discussed the philosophical, psychological, and linguistic foundations of this type
of syllabus, they argued the merits of it over grammatical type. Situational syllabus focuses on teaching the practical command of four basic skills through introducing grammatical rules in the context of situation.

Jafarpour Mamaghani and Zolghadri in the next chapter discussed skills-based syllabus which divides language into different modules for listening, speaking, reading and writing, and sub-skills of these larger skills. They started with the definition and features of skills-based syllabus and continued with theoretical underpinnings, merits and demerits, and applications. They finalized the chapter by illustrating the skills-based syllabus with a number of examples.

Lexical syllabus was the next type focused on by Dat Bao in Chapter 7. He mentioned that the lexical syllabus sees vocabulary as the most important component of syllabus design, and argued the necessity for optimal selection of words to be taught and learned. Such goal can be achieved through focusing on a range of factors including frequency of use, range of appearance in various text types or genres, availability, meaning coverage, learnability and teachability.

In the next chapter, Goodith White introduced genre-based syllabus including the genres which a particular group of students need to produce or understand in their life outside the classroom. She discussed how might a teacher draw up a genre based syllabus for his/her class.

David Little debated about functional syllabus in the following chapter. He elaborated on the historical development of such kind of syllabus which was initiated by the development of *The Threshold Level*, by the Council of Europe.

Chapter 10 co-authored by Fitzsimmons-Doolan and Stoller focused on content-based syllabus. They argued A continuum of CBI models including topical, thematic, sustained-content, linked, sheltered, partial-immersion, and immersion models. Then, they came up with tips for teachers who want to incorporate aspects of content-based instruction into their teaching procedure.

In the following chapter, Anne Ma elaborated on task-based syllabus. She argued a continuum showing different understanding of tasks and then proposed a framework for organizing tasks. Azarnoosh and Kargozari, in Chapter 12, dealt with the negotiated syllabus and its origins, types, frameworks, advantages and disadvantages. Finally, the last chapter of the book authored by Michael Handford discussed discourse syllabus in Chapter 13. He debated how discourse approach benefits learners.
1. THE CONCEPT OF SYLLABUS DESIGN AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A Look at Five Major Syllabus Designs

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss EFL syllabus/curriculum design and development. It will cover five major designs from a historical perspective and discuss their pedagogical significance. Sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 discuss the purposes, functions, and reasons behind syllabus/curriculum design while section 6 provides a critical review of these five major Syllabus types: the Grammatical Syllabus, the Notional-Functional Syllabus, the Lexical Syllabus, the Task-Based Syllabus, and the Content-based Syllabus.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SYLLABUS

What is the purpose of a syllabus of the L2 classroom? Robinson (2011, p. 294) describes syllabus design as the compilation of decisions regarding units and their sequence of performance. At the lowest level, the syllabus may simply be a reminder or a list of things to do for the busy teacher who has little classroom planning time. However, a good syllabus does much more than that. A well-written syllabus could provide a doorway into the pedagogical beliefs of the teacher (or the course writer).

In some cases, the chosen course book automatically becomes “the syllabus”, but is that ready-made syllabus the best that you can do? -Certainly not. But what can ELT course books do to help proper language acquisition? Below is a modified version of a list from Tomlinson (2008, p. 6).

• Provide rich experience with varying genres and text types
• Provide pleasing experience through beautiful art and design
• Use of multimedia for rich and varied language learning
• Help learners make discoveries for themselves
• Help learners become autonomous language learners
• Providing extra materials for extensive listening and extensive reading
• Help learners personalize and localize their language learning

A. Faravani et al. (Eds.), Issues in Syllabus Design, 1–23. © 2018 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.
Keep this list of points handy so that you can re-examine them easily, as you read this chapter.

Let us move on to a discussion on Syllabus vs Curriculum. Is there a difference? Richards (2001, p. 2) distinguishes a difference in scope in the UK - the curriculum is the bigger picture. As “the bigger picture”, the curriculum can incorporate three steps: (1) course planning, (2) materials/methods, and (3) course evaluation (Nunan, 1988, pp. 4–5). Historically, because grammar-centric teaching has been so popular, syllabus design was simply the order of the grammar points that would be taught within the framework of the curriculum. However, in the United States, Syllabus and Curriculum often mean the same thing. This chapter will treat Syllabus and Curriculum separately.

So, what is the purpose of the syllabus? Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 83–84) say:

- to break language down into manageable units and provide a practical basis for textbooks and instructional blocks
- to thus provide teachers and learners with moral support
- to reassure students and/or sponsors that a course has been well planned: its cosmetic role
- to give both students and teachers an idea of where the course is going
- to act as an implicit statement of the views held by the course designers regarding language and language learning—telling students not only what they are to learn but why
- to guide the selection of materials, texts and exercises
- to ensure an element of uniformity across a school or educational system
- to assess how successful a student has been during a course by providing a basis for testing

Now, what should the syllabus (and/or materials) being used achieve? One point Tomlinson (2011) brings up is impact. However, “impact” in Brazil may not be “impact” in Austria. So, how can useful impact be achieved? Tomlinson provides a useful list that can help benchmark assessment of syllabus and material design (2011, p. 8).

- Novelty
- Variety
- Attractive presentation
- Appealing content
- Achievable challenge

IS THE COURSEBOOK REALLY A SYLLABUS?

The course book (or its Table of Contents) does not have to be, and in some cases, should not be, used instead of real syllabus design. Why might this be a problem? As
a textbook writer, I have come across this inconvenient truth: textbook publishers are a business – they sometimes care more about book sales than pedagogy. Tomlinson (2003, 2008) agrees. There are several other obstacles for writers:

Materials writers are faced with a number of competing demands, then. They need to make their materials suitable for a wide variety of teachers, who have different amounts of experience, are more or less qualified, and who may have differing teaching styles and beliefs. As Johnson et al. (2008) study shows, experienced and inexperienced teachers may be looking for different things from materials (Harwood, 2011, p. 14).

With such compromises in place, should the course book table of contents be used as the official syllabus of the course? Harwood continues (2011, pp. 14–15): Textbook writers need to make their materials easy enough to follow for the inexperienced teacher by, for instance, making activities build upon one another in a transparent and predictable sequence, or by providing detailed teachers’ notes, while at the same time ensuring the materials are flexible enough for the more experienced teacher to adapt in any number of ways. In the words of a textbook editor, then, authors are trying ‘to please all the people all the time’ (Young, 1990, p. 77; see also Mares, 2003).

So, why do EFL instructors use the Table of Contents from their course book as a quick template for their official syllabus? Sinclair and Renouf (1988) say: (1) convenience and (2) lack of supporting documents. Also, if the tests are going to be based on the textbooks, then following the course book’s path may be most logical. In that case, one solution is to base the syllabus on the course book’s Table of Contents, but expect to make significant adaptations.

Also, a good syllabus should clearly define assessment protocols. However, many of the best-selling course books (1) do not provide student assessment protocols, nor do they and (2) clearly push a single methodology. For example, the so-called communicative course books often leave the specific methodology up to the teacher (Whong, 2011), perhaps because many of them are a mish-mash anyway. Because of these points, the course book should not become an “instant syllabus” – but you know understand why this happens so often.

SYLLABUS ANALYSIS

Richards and Rodgers (2001, pp. 20–34) discuss their tiered framework for evaluating methodologies. The three tiers are Approach (the underlying theories), Design (selection of content), and Procedure (specifics of the activities). This has become a somewhat standard tiering framework for TEFL/TESL courses. It is a method that forces teachers to consider the development and the connectedness across the three tiers. An adaptation of Richards and Rogers’ framework (Figure 1) may help teachers and writers to: (1) sharpen their awareness of theory and (2) force them to examine how theory relates to the design of courses, the procedures within
the classroom, and how it ultimately affects theory by either strengthening it or editing it.

**Figure 1. The dynamic effects of the approach-design-procedure framework**

**PRODUCT VS PROCESS?**

The *product* syllabus focuses on what linguistic content is to be learned. It is very clear and formal—such as a list of grammar points, or vocabulary words. This is suited for standardized tests (such as TOEIC) where everything is clearly prescribed and transparent. The product syllabus and the standardized test have a reciprocal relationship; they tend to inform each other and can create their own *microcosm* (Figure 2). This can be dangerous. Since they can (and do) exist within their own universe, they can exist without real-world applicability. This is not to say that they are not without merit, but the potential of them turning into an *existence for their own sake* is also very real. This type of syllabus can also be called a content-based syllabus, or in extreme cases, “teaching for the test.”

**Figure 2. The potential microcosmic nature of the product syllabus and test cycle**
The opposing type of syllabus is the process syllabus. It does not work off a list of words of bullet points, but a set of learning processes. It short, it defines the skills that are to be acquired—but not the content. According to Nunan (1988, p. 40), the product syllabus and the process syllabus are therefore incompatible. As defined, the process syllabus creates open-ended learning situations for building real-world skills. The content syllabus puts sharp focus on very particular content, often ignoring the development of the real-world skills necessary to use the content (White, 1988). This argument is logical, but remember that it is fully possible to fit both approaches into your lesson plans, because this dual approach is certainly beneficial, I encourage you to do so!

SYNTHETIC VS ANALYTIC?

The synthetic syllabus assumes that the teaching of small bits of the language will eventually create a whole structural framework for which the language will live. It assumes that language is like a set of building blocks that can be layered down for a foundation and then built into meaningful structures. Such a syllabus obviously matches grammar-based pedagogy.

What about the analytic syllabus? In short, it seeks to (1) identify needs and then (2) satisfy them with the appropriate language usage. Robinson (2011, p. 306) assures that due to cognitive research and various other factors, “the shift from synthetic to analytic approaches … can be expected to continue.” Wilkins’ describes the analytic syllabus as: (1) a list of purposes for the L2 learning and (2) the means to meet those purposes. It is a more social, real-world, and student-centered. Grammar instruction comes when called for.

Which is more appropriate for the L2 classroom, synthetic or analytical? Ellis responds (2012, pp. 342–343):

There is now plenty of evidence to show that both approaches can contribute to learning… it will have to be filtered through the teacher’s personal understanding of the instructional context, and this, to a large extent, will depend on experience.

So, according to Ellis, although analytical syllabi are now popular, it seems that, to some extent, some parts of a synthetic syllabus should be adapted into teachers’ and course writers’ syllabi.

LINEAR VS CYCLICAL?

Is language learning more like a delivery truck, or is it more organic than that? The linear syllabus assumes the former. Similar to the above mentioned product syllabus, the linear syllabus attempts to add new blocks of information to a collecting mass. The more blocks added, the more learning. The problem is, language learning is not linear (Dörnyei, 2008, p. 41). We are not computers. We cannot keep feeding our brains with new linguistic information and expect it all be retrievable on demand.
Research tells that language acquisition is much more of an organic, natural process (Skehan, 1996, pp. 18–19). So, we need a recycling, or cyclical syllabus. Furthermore, motivation to learn language is also not linear either. It’s dynamic (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 11).

So, although the better choice is obvious, this Linear vs Cyclical discussion is still very relevant because many mainstream course books (and therefore syllabi) still use a linear design! Good teachers know that recycling is important, so adding a recycling design into the syllabus may be deemed unnecessary—but should we really assume this? Can we realistically expect all teachers to know about and actually implement the necessary recycling without constant prompting from the course book? There is no consensus on this yet, but my feeling is that at least some cyclical features should be incorporated into any syllabus.

SYLLABUS DESIGN FACTORS

What factors influence the design of a syllabus? Below is a general list adapted from Tagg and Woodward (2011).

A. Common practice/trends  
B. Theories of Second Language Acquisition/pedagogy  
C. Wider educational context  
D. Course Objectives  
E. Learner backgrounds

Of these, mainstream course books would connect most directly with A, B and C. Less mainstream course books may focus on D. However, this leaves E alone—left for the teacher to deal with and/or up to chance. But, how many teachers and syllabus writers know specific details about their students before designing their syllabi?

From a student’s point of view, is it is fair to leave one of the most important factors on this list up to chance? What can be done about this? Below (Figure 3) I have provided my own assessment sheet of important design factors for consideration during syllabus design. I believe this assessment sheet can be useful during the pre-design stages of syllabus and materials writing, and also as an in-use and post-use assessment plan. It can be applied per chapter for single chapter assessment—then all chapters assessments can be strung together to form the basis of a comprehensive syllabus assessment. Or, it can be used more simplistically by applying just once, for the entire syllabus.

In syllabus design, once the general design begins to take shape, how are the smaller instructional blocks to be designed? An instructional block should be self-contained, yet contribute to the larger goals of the syllabus (Richards, 2001).

The typical syllabus has chapters that would are self-contained and individually assessable. Within each chapter, there may be several subsections that breakdown the learning into smaller chunks. Richards (2001, p. 166) furthers: the coherence
of each chapter should be both horizontal and vertical, meaning that there should be front-to-back coherence throughout the chapter, and top-to-bottom coherence on each page (Figure 4).

Richards pushes for ‘closure’ on each page. Several mainstream course books adhere to this maxim. However, there are still course books, such as readers, where long passages break these design rules.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF FIVE COMMON SYLLABUS TYPES

This section will take a look at five common syllabus designs: grammatical, notional-functional, lexical, task-based, and content-based. We will briefly look into their histories and significance, then, critically analyze their design and potential.
Grammatical Syllabus

The grammatical syllabus has long been a standard in language teaching. The historical roots of the grammatical syllabus are known to have come from the study of Latin. What is the grammar-translation method? It is a method of translating text from L2 to L1 and deducing grammatical features (top-down), conducted in the L1. It is very straightforward and needs little (or no) L2 communicative competence from the teacher. Simply put, the grammar-translation method (GTM) is the basis of the grammatical syllabus—GTM is derived from the teaching of Latin. This “explains why this method was not concerned with developing productive L2 competence in the learners” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 273). According to Dörnyei, GTM is a simplistic and pragmatic method that is regrettably not “conducive to developing productive language skills.”(ibid.)—the grammatical syllabus is an extension of this methodology. Let’s now take a closer look.

Criticisms: The grammatical syllabus. Skehan (1996) discusses how chosen structures presented by a teacher do not automatically lead to language acquisition. Ellis (1997) agrees by saying that teaching may have very little effect on when and how learners may or may not learn a structure because of each student learns differently. Widdowson (1988) argues that because grammar teaching separates learning from real-life contexts, the true meaning is often lost. This questions the purpose of teaching and learning. Lightbown and Spada (1999) question the effectiveness of the grammar-based syllabi, stating that focus on accuracy does not directly connect to high proficiency.

However, some teachers continued to argue that the grammatical syllabus is useful. During this battle, interestingly, a halfway point did emerge (Dörnyei, 2009). There are several versions with confusingly similar name structures, but I shall simply discuss them collectively as a focus on form (FoF) here.

Although a strict grammatical syllabus was proven to be inadequate for most purposes, the full dropping of grammar teaching was equally inadequate (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Dörnyei, 2009; Whong, 2011). The term FoF cleverly hid the word grammar, while having learners focus on sub-sentence grammatical issues. Sometimes these issues were based on real-time needs, sometimes they were based on pre-emptive or proactive decisions by the teacher (or course writer).

Advantages: The grammatical syllabus. Are there advantages to the grammar-based syllabus? It is easy to follow and easy to assess. Such a syllabus can be very transparent, so by going through the steps, there may be a strong feeling of achievement. Progress can be easy to measure.

In short, such a syllabus is easy to manage because of its pragmatic approach. It is also probably familiar to most teachers from their own L1 learning, so it would be relatively easy to implement for novice teachers. Moreover, while it may not make every learner proficient, inevitably, some students will and do have a strong aptitude
with this methodology and therefore some of them will build a natural preference for this methodology. These, for lack of a better term, “lucky” grammar-based learners do excel within this framework.

Advantage or disadvantage? According to Dörnyei (2009, p. 273), the Grammar-Translation method (and/or the grammatical syllabus) may still favorable because it:

- requires little set up time
- requires minimal teacher L2 competence and fluency
- is safe for the teacher
- is easy to assess (with multiple choice tests, for example)
- is easy to explicitly focus on (discreet) points
- can be mostly taught in the L1
- requires no higher-level (meta-cognitive) thinking/assessment

Synthesis: The grammatical syllabus. In this subsection, we examined the grammatical syllabus. Although it has advantages as being transparent and pragmatic, there are several criticisms of this type of syllabus design. Perhaps the most important is that although it sets out to be a no-nonsense, pragmatic syllabus, its nevertheless synthetic and moreover, does not often enough result in higher proficiency than other design types. It takes learners “through the motions”, and may make learners feel like they are studying hard and learning, which may or may not raise their motivation, but by the end of the day it would seem that much of that work goes to waste.

I find that the biggest faults in the grammatical syllabus lie within the inherent assumptions that go with it:

- L2 learners need to explicitly learn grammar
- L2 grammar teaching leads to grammatical L2 usage
- L2 grammar has logical rules that are definable, teachable, and learnable
- all L2 learners can learn L2 grammar at the same pace
- (from teachers) “I learned it this way, why can’t you?”

These inherent assumptions that may have been nurtured by the long-term historical adherence to grammatical syllabus design, are assumptions that I would define as old school. They are traditional assumptions that have no significant neuroscientific basis. Ironically, they can still be found in classrooms that have decided to stop using a grammatical syllabus. This is presumably because these old school assumptions have been carried over to other forms of L2 teaching.

Notional-Functional Syllabus

The notional-functional (NF) syllabus developed in Europe as a reaction toward the grammatical syllabus, although it ultimately, and ironically, gathered many of
the same criticisms. What is the NF syllabus? Wilkins’ (1976, p. 18) in a definitive statement says,

(I)t takes the desired communicative capacity as the starting point. In drawing up a notional syllabus, instead of asking how speakers of the language express themselves or when and where they use the language, we ask what it is they communicate through language. We are then able to organize language teaching in terms of the content rather than the form of the language. For this reason the resulting syllabus is called the notional syllabus.

The 1970s showed a shift toward a more communicative approach with more of a focus on context and therefore the social aspects of language usage. Keypoints from Wilkins (1976) are that (1) the NF syllabus is a communicative syllabus, (2) it raises motivation because it is communicative, and (3) it covers “all kinds of language functions” (ibid, p. 19). Let us focus on Wilkins’ first point. Is the NF syllabus really a communicative syllabus? Widdowson argues that there is no such thing as a communicative syllabus (1990, p. 130); this categorically disqualifies NF. What is the NF syllabus then? Let us examine the words separately.

White (1988, p. 75) describes notions as categories that describe the intentions of the language usage. Nunan (1988, p. 35) describes them as conceptual meanings via language usage such as objects or relationships. Examples would be: time, ownership, direction, frequency, and cause (Nunan, 1988, p. 35). The functions are then the communicative purposes of the language in use. Examples would be: approving, persuading, suggesting, and identifying (Nunan, 1988, p. 35). This type of syllabus is a logical step up from the grammatical syllabus, yet it does not bury grammar. It simply shifts the priority to more meaningful usage (to notions and functions), with the importance of grammar teaching basically remaining intact. In this way, it embodied natural language usage more realistically (Whong, 2011).

Although at first glance the NF syllabus may appear to be a process-based syllabus, upon closer examination, it is still a “to-do list”—telling us what is to be learnt, but with no defining teaching guidelines to go with it.

For the above reasons, the NF syllabus should not be assumed to be a process-based syllabus. Additionally, it is also a synthetic syllabus by design. It puts forth a list of to-dos, making it look like it is based on true learner needs (Stern, 1992), but ultimately the NF syllabus moves on regardless of the learners’ real-world needs.

Criticisms: The notional-functional syllabus. What are the criticisms of the NF syllabus? As touched on earlier, the NF syllabus is similar to the grammatical syllabus in many ways, so they share many of the same criticisms. Widdowson (1979) argues that although the shift from a list of grammar points to a list of NF points still produces a list—and such lists are not automatically compatible with real learning. Brumfit (1981) identifies difficulties in defining these ‘notions’ and
goes on to explain the difficulty in applying the learning to real social contexts, seriously attacking the NF design. Nunan (1988, p. 37) agrees by saying that breaking language into small pieces misrepresents the nature of communication. In sort, the NF syllabus is as synthetic—and therefore, problematic: 

Because of the inherent dependency for a needs analysis, it can be argued that the NF syllabus can only be as good as the quality of the needs analysis. So, the inadequacies of any needs analysis trickle down to the NF selections. This brings up other problems as criteria for assessment and sequencing: Which NF list items should come first and why? How can we decide which functions are more complex? More appropriate?

Also, the outcomes of NF teaching are not foreseeable because they are not controlled by the syllabus, therefore making comprehensive design and assessment of the outcomes problematic. Furthermore, the lack of protocols may be one reason for its current lack of popularity, especially compared to the grammatical syllabus with its clear focus on accuracy, making assessment not only easy, but, transparent. In this way, although the NF and grammatical syllabi have several similarities, differences such as a lack of focus on accuracy make it more difficult to implement.

Advantages: The notional-functional syllabus. What are the advantages of the NF syllabus? Conceived as an improvement over the grammatical syllabus, there are several advantages to it. It can implement more realistic learning tasks based on real-world communication. It provides a means for contextual understanding and realization before performance because it grasps onto cultural needs (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p. 17). But perhaps most importantly, the lack of assessment protocols discussed as a disadvantage on the previous page allows for more flexible teaching, such as cyclical pedagogic practice, and naturally allows for the addition of socio-cultural components. Regardless of the actual learning outcomes, it can also be motivational for the students because the syllabus, or the to-do list, is transparent; students may gain a healthy feeling of completion after each item is crossed off the list.

Synthesis: The notional-functional syllabus. Although the NF syllabus was designed to be a step up from the grammatical syllabus, in reality it is (a) very similar in many ways and (b) actually a step down when it comes to assessment policies. On the plus side, it is more humanistic—it allows for the additions of socio-cultural aspects and the realization of contextual influences. At the end of the day however, it is still synthetic and product-based; it is not scientific nor is it logical from a biological perspective.

Lexical Syllabus

What is the lexical syllabus? It is a syllabus with a keen focus on lexis. Why is it called lexis and not vocabulary? The more common word is of course vocabulary,
and it is often taught separately from grammar. However, when a “word” is treated as having generative functionality (as in, having its own unique grammatical functionalities and idiosyncrasies), then it is upgraded to the term lexis (Tagg & Woodward, 2011). It can also be used for chunks or formulaic language, where sets of words are used as a singular utterance – often with a singular meaning. It is important to note that while on paper and within traditional grammar, individual words seem to be their own entity with their own purpose, the lexical concept of formulaic language is that small phrases can act together as a single unit and are not registered as individual words within our minds. Corpus-based research is often used help generate the lexical syllabus—by looking at real-life collocations. This blurs the premise of the traditional grammar vs vocabulary dichotomy and forces us to think and re-think the psycholinguistic and pedagogical implications set forth by these notions.

Generative Lexicon theory (Pustejovsky, 1998; Pustjovsky et al., 2012), although perhaps not famous in the mainstream is slowly becoming its own sub-field of study. Pustejovsky theorizes that lexicon functions generatively by:

- providing words for characterizing lexical information
- developing a framework for manipulating distinctions in word descriptions
- formalizing a set of mechanisms for specialized composition that function in context, especially in novel situations

The third part is the distinctive part. Far too many theories of language simply ignore the fact that we can combine words uniquely and use words and grammar in novel ways based on context, without instruction. We have the capacity to create formulaic utterances “from the air”, simply based on the context we happen to be in. Generative lexicon theory embraces the fact that we can produce specialized compositions in novel situations, in a non-dictionary-like way. It is an important step forward in understanding language learning and pedagogy.

So what is a lexical syllabus? The lexical syllabus moves away from straight grammar teaching and focuses on real-world word/phrase usage, frequency, and their unique generative powers. Therefore, instead of moving from simple grammatical forms and gradually building up to complex forms, the lexical syllabus focuses on the unique generative properties per word or phrase (collocations) with the keys being found with the usage and frequency. In essence, each word/phrase is treated as having its own generative word map—different usage patterns are studied per word/phrase, making the learners experts at identifying the word and its varied usages efficiently. Below (Figure 5) is a map of the usage of HAVE.

The lexical syllabus does not (cannot) offer an underlying theory of language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). However, the lexical syllabus does assume that the rote memorization of the grammatical rules of a language is not as effective as repeated exposure to naturally occurring usage. Therefore, it agrees with the cyclical syllabus.
The underlying pedagogical theory was, by viewing words/phrases as lexical items, the learners would be able to have a better chance of recognizing and using the words and phrases correctly in real word contexts because of the cyclically interconnected coverage generated from the connection of meaning and usage of each lexical item. On the other hand, in the real world, a strict focus on grammar learning via a grammar syllabus would call for real-time spontaneity, creative thinking, an excellent memory, and the ability to take personal risks for the sake of communication. This is too much to deal with for the average learner, especially under pressure to communicate. With the real world demands put on potential grammar-based learners as users being so intense, the lexical syllabus, with the way it primes learners on all typical usages per word, then providing them with the capacity to generate context appropriate phrases, seems to be a much more elegant pedagogy. This was a smart step away from straight grammar teaching that brought to light a very new way of looking at language teaching and linguistics. However, there are criticisms.

Criticalisms: The lexical syllabus. Pesky questions that arise with a corpus-derived syllabus such as: Which corpus should we choose and how should we use it? Should a beginner course use a corpus created from children’s books or from adult’s? Either answer (or a mixture of both), could be justifiable but the choice would significantly alter the content of the syllabus; usage and frequency vary greatly per corpus. How can we make that choice?
Also, from the Willis’ perspective, there is the inevitable heavy reliance of usage analysis on the learners’ side. So, without comprehensive and cohesive analysis, the learners may gain little from the lessons. As Willis and Willis define it, the lexical syllabus has students be the researchers, while the teacher is only the facilitator, who may not know better then the learners in some cases (the results from the analysis may be just as illuminating to the teacher as it is to the learners). Lewis contradicts this by shifting the focus onto the importance of teacher talk and the teacher’s output. Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 136) discuss how a nice blend could be more favorable.

Identified problems/question with the lexical syllabus that have yet to be worked out:

- No standard or unifying foundational theory of language acquisition
- Focuses on single words or collocations too much; what about longer phrases?
- (3) Should the highest frequency lexical items (such as: the, and, but, and a) be taught first, or not? [Logical arguments can be made for both paths]
- (4) Willis’ implementation works in tandem with task-based pedagogy. So, is the syllabus a task-based syllabus, or a lexical syllabus?

The lexical syllabus has yet to gain mainstream popularity, although it remains highly innovative theoretically. Collaborative efforts with the task-based syllabus, seem much more promising. Along those collaborative lines, Segalowitz and Gattbonton, who have done extensive work in psycholinguistic issues, provide ACCESS methodology (2005) a form of Communicative Language Teaching, with innovative cyclical activities for the automatization of formulaic language. Regarding the lexical syllabus, the immerging patterns seems to be that lexical theory can be used for innovative purposes in other syllabi types, but currently, the lexical syllabus alone seems to be insufficient.

Advantages: The lexical syllabus. The lexical syllabus is a novel approach to language teaching, based on research. It is therefore more scientific than other designs. Perhaps the biggest advantage of the lexical syllabus from the pragmatic point of view is the lack of guesswork; the syllabus is not based on writers’ assumptions. With the focus on lexical items and usage that is based on real-world usage, the learning content tends to be more natural and may even foster deeper processing (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997, p. 3). But even more importantly, the introduction of the generative lexical concept was ground breaking. Doing away with the grammar vs vocabulary dichotomy, and viewing word/phrases as having their own generative grammatical qualities based on context was a significant step forward.

Synthesis: The lexical syllabus. Perhaps the lexical syllabus should be summed up as “having great potential as a theory, but not developed enough to be a syllabus.” It is a major theoretical syllabus type that is not globally popular, although there are currently some corpora-based course books commercially
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available; the flagship of such course books would have to be the Touchstone series (McCarthy et al., 2005) from Cambridge University Press. However, without a unifying theory underlying the teaching, the lexical syllabus remains shallow from the researcher’s perspective, and it suffers from this. It is therefore often combined with other syllabus types, such as the task-based syllabus, discussed in the next subsection.

Task-Based Syllabus

What is a task-based (TB) syllabus? In theory, it is a type of syllabus that is learning-centered (not to be confused with learner-centered). It therefore should be a procedural syllabus based on teacher-selected tasks that are assumed to promote the language acquisition process, while downplaying the learning of pre-selected linguistic content (Tagg & Woodward, 2011). Skehan’s view (1998, p. 260) is that the students should be given freedom within the framework of the tasks for real communicative engagement in the tasks. Skehan’s view can also be read as being learner-centered, making it a hybrid learning and learner syllabus. More importantly, in contrast to other types of syllabi discussed earlier (that have little or no pedagogical protocols), the TB syllabus, grounded in task-based methodology, is a syllabus that is inseparable from the methodology. In other words, it is a syllabus that is based on a clear methodology and a clear theory. That said, defining what a “task” actually is has not been easy—this has caused some controversy. Moreover, Dörnyei (2009) discusses how TB is little more than a repackaged form of Communicative Language Teaching (or perhaps notional-functional), with the most significant difference being that it may incorporate a bit more focus on form. It may be controversial to say this, but since TB is so grounded in methodology, it could/should probably primarily be viewed as a methodology instead of a syllabus type. In that way it could be blended into other syllabi, strengthening its own mission while enhancing the “host” syllabi (such as with the lexical-TB culmination discussed in the previous section).

What is a task? Anything related to learning can be construed as a task, but such a wide-ranging definition is not very helpful. Van den Branden (2006) concurs. He proposes that it should be an activity that has a communicative goal to be met via meaningful usage of language, rather than, but not exclusive of a focus on form. In other words, it can be just about any communicative classroom activity that does not have a keen focus on grammatical accuracy. Not everyone agrees.

Below are a few typical definitions:

Nunan: A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on form (1989, p. 10).

Van den Branden: An activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language (2006, p. 4).
Edwards and Willis:

- The principal focus of a task is on the negotiation of meaning rather than language form.
- Learners are aware of the goal or purpose of the task, which may include creating a list or a map, solving a problem.
- The outcome of the task is to be shared with other students.
- Listening, reading, writing and/or speaking may be involved.
- Language focused study is incorporated into a TBL lesson, but not generally until after the task is completed, so that learners remain focused on the communicative purpose of the task (2005, p. 3).

Skehan (1998, p. 95) takes it further and emphasizes the need to make the task copy real-world usage with the goal being the solution of a real-world problem. This seems to be the natural and logical extension of this methodology. However, Van den Branden (2006, p. 6) argues the validity in real-world problem solving within the classroom—how realistic can an artificial environment be?

Perhaps the more global question is, compared to the TB syllabus, how realistic are the other types of syllabi and their textbooks? J. Willis (1996a, p. 68) calls them “impoveryished and restricted.” They only render caricatures or over-simplified versions of usage. Deeper significances and socio-cultural nuances are typically stripped away from the material because they are presented in neat packages. D. Willis (1996, p. 51) agrees, “we know that language is a complex system which cannot be ‘presented’ to learners in a series of neat packages.”

But is the TB syllabus the answer? J. Willis (1996a, p. 88), realized the need to expand; learners needed real-time interaction outside of the classroom for exposure to semi-prefabricated chunks of usage, which could lead to top-down discourse analysis. In this way we can see how Willis and Willis bring corpus analysis and TB learning together.

If linear learning is a fallacy and naturally cyclical learning (relying on each learner’s internal analytical processing that is not directly controlled by the teacher) is closer to reality (as discussed by Dörnyei, 2009), then the TB syllabus should have more potential for elegant language learning and teaching.

Results from TB learning are not linear and therefore may not be immediate (Skehan, 1996, pp. 18–19). For this reason, TB does not directly teach grammar nor does it expect learners to rote-memorize grammar points. Learners are seen as hypothesizers that learn from implicit and explicit guesswork via task work, or a conscious focus on meaning via interaction with an unconscious focus on structures (Skehan, 1996, pp. 18–19).

The TB syllabus is the first introduced here that seriously considers the cognitive processing and development of students. Long and Crookes (1991), and Prabhu (1987) also argue similarly, with a focus on the importance of negotiation of meaning.
and the reliance of analytical internal processes, while J. Willis (1996b) also stresses the importance of student motivation.

How is the task-based syllabus designed? The typical J. Willis (1996b) style has three parts:

- Pre-task: introduction to the topic, the task, special words/phrases
- Task cycle: small group work; teacher is monitor; plan and prepare in small groups for a public demonstration of their outcomes.
- Language focus: not to be grammar-focused, but exploration of language usage for consciousness-raising and reduction of fossilization.

Because the term of ‘task’ is so inherently wide, there have been a number of classifications that have been mandated over the years:

**Task Classification: Dichotomies**
- Nunan (1989): real world tasks vs pedagogical tasks
- Long (1989): divergent vs convergent
- Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993): one way vs two way

Willis and Willis (2007, pp. 72–78), focusing on cognitive processes list these seven requirements for tasks:

- Listing
- Ordering and sorting
- Visual support
- Matching
- Comparing and contrasting
- Problem solving tasks and puzzles
- Projects and creative tasks
- Sharing personal experiences

No matter what the task, there is a heavy reliance on autonomous discovery along with peer-to-peer affect (inclusive of help and pressure). Although this may seem a bit too idealistic, it does emulate real world interaction, probably more realistically than any of the other syllabi introduced so far. But it should be noted that the other syllabi were basically method-less (lacking in theory), whereas TB is the deliberate meshing of theory, method, and syllabus.

**Criticisms: The task-based syllabus.** Are there criticisms of the TB syllabus? Samuda and Bygate (2008) find it to be controversial and to be an attractor of vocal critics, as does Dörnyei (2009). Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006, p. 29) identify three problems: (1) specificity, (2) complexity, and (3) extrapolation. Regarding specificity, it is assumed that the teacher/writer bases specifications on some sort of a needs analysis—but is it really possible for the teacher/writer to be able to realize an appropriate set of tasks for every student need? If not,
how useful would approximations be? Regarding complexity, how is a task to be graded?

Regarding extrapolation, how much can be expected from the learners? How much should the teacher attempt to induce? If a teacher “gives in” and sums up the learning with explicit grammar instruction at the end, would this negate the previous learning, or add to it? What if the students requested explicit grammatical instruction during the task? Would it be wrong to assist them? These are all important questions that each TB proponent may have different answers to, making the TB syllabus much less transparent and more confusing than it intended to be.

Moreover, Edwards and Willis (2005, pp. 27–28) point out that teachers comfortable with a grammar-based syllabus may actually be hostile toward TB learning because of the lack of control over language usage and linguistic outcomes. Indeed, a non-native English teacher may not feel confident enough to facilitate TB English language learning without clear answer sheets or rulebooks to rely on. (Without a native or native-like competence, how can they assess the learning output competently? They would not be able to.) This is perhaps the number one reason for the popularity of the grammatical syllabus among non-native teachers – you don’t need to have a native-like competence as long as you been provided with an answer sheet or rulebook to assess by.

**Advantages: The task-based syllabus.** Are there advantages to the TB syllabus? There are several, some on the theoretical level and some on the pragmatic level. For one, it acknowledges the inadequacies of all product syllabi; it takes into account human cognition and cognitive development by being a process-based syllabi. It is also procedural. It builds and relies on learner autonomy—something very real and important when the student leaves the classroom. Also, students will inevitably be at different levels of competence and motivation in any classroom. By consistently using group work in the beginning: (1) learners of different levels may feel less pressure because of the smaller number of eyes on them at any given moment, (2) learners implicitly and explicitly motivate each other and help negotiate meaning with each other at a group level, and (3) no matter how intuitive a teacher/author may be, their predictions regarding teaching order cannot replace real-time language usage during a realistic task (Cox, 2005).

**Content-Based Syllabus**

What is content-based instruction (CBI)? Is not all learning “content-based”? According to Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989, p. vii), it is the “integration of content learning with language teaching aims. More specifically, it refers to the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material.”
What good came of this? Some potent criticisms of standard L2 teaching have been: (1) the separation of “meaningfulness” from the language being taught (Kelly, personal communication, August, 2012) and (2) the “dumbing-down” of the content—the learners are typically treated as cognitively deficient people (Murphy, 2009). But how else can you teach the basics of an L2? If you are teaching an L2, isn’t it inevitable that you end up treating learners as being cognitively deficient? For example, Klein (2001, p. 13768) says, “Linguists and laymen alike tend to consider children’s way to their mother tongue to be the most important type of language acquisition.”

CBI does away with this dilemma. With a content-based syllabus, the learners are given a real topic to study that presumably matches their cognitive capabilities, and expects them to make do with the content’s learning via their L2. It provides the learners with a cognitive challenge that is realistically motivating in a way that is disconnected from the typical focus on language learning. Although it may sound counterintuitive and/or counterproductive (especially from a grammar-based teaching perspective), this type of learning expects the onset of natural motivation to use the language to accomplish the activity without ever having to focus on the language usage as an integral part of the learning.

In CBI, the L2 usage is not necessarily seen as anything other than what it presents as its innate instrumental value. In short, the L2 is no longer the subject of study; the L2 becomes the means to reach the goal. Brown (2001, pp. 49–50) seems to agree by saying, “Content-based classrooms may yield an increase in intrinsic motivation and empowerment, since students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives.” Brown continues, “Students are pointed beyond transient extrinsic factors, like grades and tests, to their own competence and autonomy as intelligent individuals capable of actually doing something with their new language.” (p. 50). Larsen-Freeman et al. (2011, p. 144), state that, “CBI can also be an effective way for students to learn language in the language class, using themes that students find of interest. Such themes provide sustained motivation beyond intermediate levels of proficiency and prepare students.” It seems there is a consensus regarding the motivational qualities and the real-world qualities of CBI, at least on a theoretical level.

**Criticisms.** With such a promising foundation, what could be wrong with CBI? On the theoretical level, it does look promising. However, several drawbacks can be uncovered. For one, finding suitable content may prove to be difficult depending upon the composition of the students’ needs. Also, would CBI be appropriate of all age groups?—Probably not. Therefore, because CBI attempts to not “dumb-down” the content, it may not be suitable to young learners and novice learners. The most significant criticism would be that when and if students fall into the flow of CBI in a meaningful way, they can all-to-easily disregard the means (the L2) and “triumphantly” reach their ends with their L1, and be fully satisfied with the outcome. This is due to the fact that the L2 usage, while expected, is secondary...
to reaching the set goal. Teachers can monitor and police the L2 usage to some extent, but if students are motivated to reach the challenging goal, it may be natural for them to lose their periphery self control (due to mechanisms related to flow, [Csikszentmihalyi, 2008]) and simply complete the task in their L1.

There is a second problem that is not solely a CBI issue, but a serious issue nevertheless – L2 learners should have at least some explicit L2 instruction. Implicit learning alone is not the best way to learn the L2 (Dörnyei, 2009; Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Of course, CBI can include explicit L2 learning, but because the basic plan is to make the L2 learning secondary to the non-linguistic learning goal, it is natural to assume that learners within a CBI framework may not be able have enough focus on form.

**Advantages.** The biggest two advantages of CBI must be: (1) the motivational aspects that coincide with empowerment and meaningful goals and (2) the fact that student are no longer only focused on studying about the L2, but using it as needed, naturally. Furthermore, CBI is easy to implement. In fact, it does not need a specialized course book—any book written in English could serve as the center piece of a CBI course.

**Synthesis.** In theory, even considering its drawbacks, CBI is full of potential. In fact, it is popular around the globe – clothed with different titles. For example, what is the difference between CBI and English for Specific Purposes (ESP)? Depending upon who you listen do, they either have considerable overlap, or they are identical. Instead of saying that CBI is a synonym of ESP, Whong (2011) goes so far as to say that CBI is a type of ESP. From a theoretical perspective, the ESP framing may have the advantage because it would seem to have more inclination to a focus on form than CBI would.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we examined syllabus design theory and then five major syllabus types: grammatical, notional-functional, lexical, task-based, and content based. The oldest of the four is the grammatical syllabus and being based on the teaching a dead language, Latin, it has proven to be not well-suited for practical language learning such as conversational language learning. That said, being the oldest and most naturally “back to basics” approach for explicit teaching that we have conceived of historically, it seems to have a naturally appealing quality for (uninformed) adult learners and teachers. The only problem, and this is a major problem, is that explicit analysis and memorization of L2 grammatical structures has not been proven to actually improve L2 fluency, and in fact has been shown to be detrimental in some cases (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). That said, some focus on form seems to be helpful for learners.
Finding the correct balance between accuracy and fluency is sometimes described as “an art more than a science.” This is due to the inevitable affect of contextual variables and motivational dynamics that statically designed syllabi (often top-down) cannot take account for. The NF syllabus was designed to be an ingenious improvement over the grammatical syllabus but because it is still product-based and static, it carries over many of the same criticisms from the grammatical syllabus.

I would like to applaud the lexical syllabus for being scientifically oriented, but without its own theoretical pedagogy, it is vague and somewhat lifeless as a stand-alone syllabus. It is therefore often paired with task-based learning, which is also a limping syllabus type, if it is an actual syllabus type all. While these two fit together well enough as a mesh of ideas, and they do seem to have good potential as a team, they have never gained substantial global popularity. This may be because the methodology is complicated to understand, and because task-based activities depend upon the teacher as being a monitor and facilitator. Also, non-native teachers may feel inadequate when it comes time to assess without a provided set of answer sheets, while native English teachers may find their job as monitor and facilitator too simplistic, and a waste of their talents.

The final syllabus type was content-based (and variant, English for Specific Purposes). This syllabus type is commendable for downplaying the “classroom subject” aspect of English, by doing away with learning about English and focusing on simply engaging in interesting learning via English. I would argue that generally speaking, content-based learning potentially lacks a significant form on focus, while the variant, English for Specific Purposes, may put the English back into focus. So, although they are similar, there is a significant difference with the inherent amount of focus on form. In sum, CBI is inherently more fluency based while ESP is more accuracy based.

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide you with historical and critical reviews of the major types of syllabi in ELT. You may ask the question, “Which is the best syllabus type from the bunch?” However, as you have seen, all syllabus designs have great strengths and weaknesses, often affected by the teaching context. There is no “one-size-fits-all” syllabus to be found. However, after you weigh all the pros and cons of the various types, it is hoped that you will arrive at a logical solution for your own teaching contexts.

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