Current Trends in Syllabus Design and Materials Development

1. Introduction

1.1 A clarification of terms: *curriculum* and *syllabus*

The terms *curriculum* and *syllabus* are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes differentiated, and sometimes misused and misunderstood.

Stern (1983)

Two senses of 'curriculum'

- the substance of a programme of studies of an educational institution or system, such as the school curriculum, the university curriculum;

- the course of study or content in a particular subject, such as the mathematics curriculum or the history curriculum, similar to the 'syllabus' for a given subject or course of studies.

Nunan (1988:3)

- A curriculum is concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose, and experience, and the relationship between teachers and learners.

- A syllabus is more localized and is based on the accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and students apply a curriculum to their situation.

In this paper

- A syllabus is a specification of what takes place in the classroom, which usually contains the aims and contents of teaching and sometimes contains suggestions of methodology.

- A curriculum, however, provides (1) general statements about the rationale about language, language learning and language teaching, (2) detailed specification of aims, objectives and targets learning purpose, and (3) implementation of a program.

1.2 The relationship between syllabus and materials

In many parts of the world, language education programs are designed following a syllabus-driven approach, that is, the syllabus determines what kind of materials will be adopted and in what ways they will be exploited for the classroom teaching. In certain educational contexts, the syllabus even determines how materials should be designed in the first place.

2. Current trends in syllabus design

2.1 An overview of types of syllabuses

Grammatical syllabuses: The syllabus input is selected and graded according to grammatical notions of simplicity and complexity. These syllabuses introduce one item at a time and require mastery of that item before moving on to the next.

Lexical syllabuses: Lexical syllabuses identify a target vocabulary to be taught normally arranged according to levels such as the first 500, 1000, 1500, 2000 words.

Skills syllabuses: Skills syllabuses are organized around the different underlying abilities that are involved in using a language for purposes such as reading, writing, listening, or speaking.

Functional-notional syllabuses: In functional-notional syllabuses, the input is selected and graded according to the communicative functions (such as requesting, complaining, suggesting, agreeing) that language learners need to perform at the end of the language programme.

Content syllabuses: In content syllabuses, the content of language learning might be defined in terms of situations, topics, themes, or other academic or school subjects.

Task-based syllabuses: Task-based syllabuses are more concerned with the classroom processes which stimulate learning. These syllabuses consist of a list of specification of the tasks and activities that the learners will engage in in class in the target language.

2.2 Current trends in syllabus design

- **The co-existence of the old and the new**
- **The emphasis on learning process**
- **The inclusion of non-linguistic objectives in syllabus**
- **The emergence of the multi-syllabus**

3. Current trends in materials development

3.1 What's on the blurb?

carefully structured multi-syllabus approach ... systematic development of all 4 skills ... emphasis on pronunciation, study skills and vocabulary learning ... authentic and semi-authentic reading and listening practice ... language for immediate communication

thorough, communicative practice of grammatical structures ... coverage of all the 4 skills … comprehensive coverage of the English tense system

proven multi-syllabus approach ... careful pacing ... allowance for different learning styles and teaching situations ... authentic reading and listening material ... motivating range of up-to-date topics

combines thorough language work with real life skills to give students the confidence and ability to communicate successfully in English

builds on and expands students' existing knowledge, encourages learner independence and develops fluency, accuracy and confidence

3.2 Current trends in materials development

- Materials themselves have evolved into much more complex objects.

- Materials development has become a profession, a wider role division between materials producers and materials users.

- Commercial materials are designed in such a way so that they remove much of the teacher's burden

- Materials are not just tools, they represent the aims, values, and methods in teaching a foreign language.

- British and American publishers have too much power, and project cultural attitudes which may be inappropriate to the needs of the vast majority learners of English as a foreign language.

- Coursebook publishers expend a great deal of time, money and effort in promoting and securing the adoption of their commercial materials, which may otherwise disappear from the market.

- Current materials tend to overburden the user with an embarrassment of riches (abundance of data).

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