

A Personal Experience of Factors Influencing the Type of Syllabus Used in the Freshman English Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the type of syllabus that I use in my Freshman English (hereafter FE) classes at the Center for English Language Education (hereafter CELE) of Asia University (hereafter AU), how it has changed over the years and whether it is appropriate or otherwise for my students.

Firstly, a number of key theoretical items will be defined and some of the literature on the subject will be discussed. Thereafter, a broad overview of the teaching philosophy of CELE will be discussed, as well as my own teaching philosophy, in order to lay the foundation for deciding what type of syllabus I have used and currently use.

DEFINITIONS OF A SYLLABUS

There are many ways of defining a syllabus and the following are just a few of the many that exist depending on which perspective one prefers. For example, Nunan (1988, 159) defines a syllabus as:

...a specification of what is to be taught in a language program and the order in which it is to be taught. A syllabus may contain all or any of the following: phonology, grammar, functions, notions, topics, themes, tasks.

Similarly, Rodgers (1989, 28) defines a syllabus as:

...the selection and organization of linguistic content to be taught...the process by which linguistic content – vocabulary, grammar, notions, functions – is selected and organized.

Ultimately there seems to be no “right” and “wrong” way to define a curriculum or a syllabus, as they are widely used concepts. However, it is generally agreed that all syllabi share certain characteristics. Hence, it could be said that they represent a specification of work, are time-related, specify sequences of events, exist for “administrative convenience, and will only be partially justified on theoretical grounds and so is negotiable and adjustable”, can “specify only what is taught; it cannot organize what is learnt”, and it is a “public document and an expression of accountability” (Brumfit 1984, 75).

In terms of teaching English in Japan, Hadley (2001, 18) defines a syllabus as:

...an endorsement of a specific set of socio-linguistic and philosophical beliefs regarding power, education and cognition... (and) differs significantly from the popular understanding of the term as it is used in Japanese schools and

universities. A syllabus is not something written on a sheet of paper for students at the beginning of a semester; rather, it is the adherence to values and assumptions that guide a teacher to structure his or her class in a particular way.

The above quotation, referring to the way in which an English syllabus differs from the “popular understanding of the term as it is used in Japanese schools and universities” and is rather “the adherence to values and assumptions that guide a teacher to structure his or her class in a particular way” makes sense in terms of the way I go about structuring my own syllabus, as will soon be explained.

TWO ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM: TYPE A AND TYPE B SYLLABI

An important factor that will influence the nature of a syllabus is a view of what teaching should be, as Stern (1992, 24) explains:

Some methods imply a specific teaching approach. For example, in an audio-lingual program the teacher is firmly in command, directing the class step by step in a benevolent but authoritarian manner. This view of teaching is in contrast to an approach in which the teacher and students are viewed as participants in a joint enterprise, democratically negotiating with each other about what to learn and how to learn it.

Similarly, White (1988) identifies Type A and Type B syllabuses as two extremes within the teaching spectrum. On the one extreme, he refers to the Type A syllabus as focusing on content in terms of discreet items (or the *what* that is to be learned) and the Type B syllabus on the other extreme as being holistic (or the *how* of what is to be learned). As White (1988, 91) says:

What Type A syllabuses have in common is a basis in content. In this respect they conform to the traditional definition of a syllabus as an organized statement of content of things to be learnt.

On the other hand, White (1988, 94) refers to Type B syllabuses as:

...a move...from content to process of learning and procedures of teaching – in other words, to methodology.

Therefore, the Type A syllabus demands that learners do not challenge underlying educational assumptions, fit in with an imposed learning system and regard the teacher as authority and foundation of knowledge. The Type B syllabus however allows learners to challenge underlying educational assumptions, develop as individuals, and regard the teacher as a facilitator or a consultant in the learning process.

White’s identification of extreme paradigms are similar to those of Wilkins (1976, 2-13), who more than ten years earlier, referred to “synthetic” and “analytic” syllabuses (with synthetic being similar to Type A, and analytic being similar to Type B). With regard to which extreme is

superior or otherwise Hadley (2001, 19) notes that:

These two viewpoints move in opposite directions, although one should not be seen as inherently better than the other.

Hadley's point that one should not inherently be seen as better is an important consideration because of circumstances, especially student attitudes and proficiencies, as well as a teacher's preferred style of teaching. He notes that most teaching approaches currently comprise elements of both and, in fact:

...over the past one hundred years, the ELT community has periodically swayed back and forth between the synthetic and analytic perspective.

This is because, as White (1988, 45) elaborates:

An approach that emphasizes process, while giving attention to socially desirable behavior and the formation of approved attitudes, may lose sight of culturally valuable content, while an approach which stresses the acquisition of approved content may be orientating learners towards conformity rather than divergence and independence.

In practice, it is hardly possible to find a pure form of a Type A or B in existence as teaching philosophies and methodologies are not static but have fluctuated historically.

THE TEACHING PHILOSOPHY OF CELE

In the CELE Website at <http://www.asia-u.ac.jp/cele> it is stated:

CELE was started by former AU President Professor Shinkichi Eto. Professor Eto believed students' communicative ability in foreign languages was integral to their internationalization. He considered internationalism and cultural awareness to the most important aspect of an education at AU.

It is important to note the emphasis on *communicative ability*, *internationalization* and *cultural awareness* in the above statement. The following is a personal explanation of what these terms mean to me as a teacher and how they can, or could be achieved.

Regarding *communicative ability*, Collins (1999: 2) describes the communicative approach as:

... a view which sees language as continuously evolving, with the consequent freeing up of judgmental attitudes of what is "wrong" and "right".

Gray (1990: 22) adds:

...the prime focus of a 'communicative approach' is on meaningful social interaction achieved through a series of communicative activities which are evaluated in terms of their communicative effectiveness rather than their grammatical accuracy.

The communicative approach has moved the application from structure to meaning, from accuracy to fluency, and from a structural syllabus (based on mainly grammatical aspects) to a functional syllabus (such as asking for directions or for opinions) (Boggles World Glossary of ESL Terms, 2001). It also encourages creative thinking.

FE students engage in communicative tasks for most of classroom time, and less time on studying language structures with the objective being comprehensible communication. Comprehensibility, as opposed to structure and form, is important in FE. Pearse (1983) notes an important distinction between realistic and real language. These are related to conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. In Japan, many students seem to be stuck in the learning phase, applying English as a realistic language, and while the "communicative approach" is a popular term in Japan, it is very hard to apply successfully, given the general passivity of Japanese students. FE tries to close the gap between realistic language (saying something to use language), and real language (using language to say something) by supporting both language learning (formal study) and acquisition (spontaneity).

In terms of *internationalization* English provides the link for socio-economic and political relationships. As Kaplan (1987, 144) indicates:

...the relative achievement of those [modernization] objectives is significantly tied to the availability of English because, for better or for worse, English is the language of science and technology.

Even in the ex-colonial and non-native English speaking countries of Nigeria (Omodiaogbe, 1992 and Bisong, 1995), the Philippines (Agana, 1998) and Singapore (Abbott, 1992) people are adopting English, and taking ownership of it to the extent that non-native speakers of English now represent more than two-thirds of English speakers in the world (Crystal, 1997). Contemporary globalization also no longer renders any sense in differentiating native speakers and non-native speakers of English (Swales, 1993), given that more exchanges take place between non-native speakers of English than between non-native speakers and native speakers of English (Walker, 2001). In most countries of the world, it is now possible to get by on English, except Japan where English is still largely regarded as an alien language.

Cultural awareness is about social identity where communication plays an important role (Podur, 2002). Culture can have different meanings, for example aesthetical, sociological, semantic and pragmatic (Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi, 1990: 3). Culture is part of the "superstructure" of society, and is closely related to the economy, or "base" of society. According to Jorge (1983), the base represents the economic relations of production in society while the superstructure determines the social consciousness, which include all the cultural, social and ideological

structures and its institutions such as education, and access to economic wealth is unequal and institutionally sustained in the interests of those in power. Thus while people identify and communicate with each other for many purposes, it would seem that the main purpose is for the economic sustenance of the society. Without an economy to sustain it, it would appear that language, society and culture could have no foundation, or purpose, to exist (Strickland, 2002). The role of English as an International Language is therefore significant in this respect in terms of national and global economic relations, and economic subsistence and survival in particular. As Hadley (2002: 1) says:

... more of Japan's citizens will need to acquire a greater level of proficiency in the English language, if Japan is to maintain its place as the world's second largest economy.

With regard to what Hadley says it is essential that students not only learn English for the sake of it being an international language, but also take a sense of ownership of it, and to internalize my teaching philosophy that promotes ownership.

MY TYPE OF SYLLABUS: FROM MAINLY TYPE A TO MAINLY TYPE B OVER THE YEARS

In keeping with the emphasis on my interpretation of the wider teaching philosophy of CELE regarding communication, internationalization and cultural awareness, and an inevitable combination of Type A and B syllabi, my syllabus for the FE students I teach has combined elements of both (but has fluctuated, as will be explained). This is because my teaching philosophy and methodology is based on the communicative approach as the CELE philosophy requires, but because I also want my students to take ownership of the English they learn (i.e. I want them to feel that their non-native English, and the way they speak it, is acceptable) and just as the Filipinos, the Singaporeans and the Nigerians (to name but a few) have done. Furthermore, I want them to internalize my teaching philosophy and methodology (i.e. which means to agree and identify with it). I see this as a precondition to their taking ownership of English (Jeffrey, 2005).

It is a great challenge to implement in practice, and my position on the spectrum between Type A and B has changed, and the cause of the change has mainly been the level of proficiency and motivation of the classes that I have taught whilst teaching FE at CELE for three years. For example, there are 22 levels in FE (1 being highest and 22 being lowest) and during my first two years as a FE teacher I taught level 20 (low proficiency, and generally de-motivated classes with most having a negative attitude towards English). In my current year, I teach level 2 (high proficiency, and generally motivated classes). When I taught level 20 my teaching approach lent predominantly towards Type A where I acted more in a benevolently authoritarian manner, but with level 2 my teaching approach currently leans predominantly towards Type B where I act more as facilitator (often letting the students decide for themselves what and how they want to learn). I have often wondered what the foundations have been for this shift from mainly Type A to mainly Type B in my approach, since my philosophy on ownership and methodology on internalization has remained the same. Perhaps the following will shed some light on the reason.

LOWER PROFICIENCY STUDENTS: PREDOMINANTLY TYPE A

It would seem that the answer could be found at what was hinted at earlier in this paper where the motivation and attitude of the students play an important role. At the lower proficiency levels most students have difficulty in the conversion from the grammar-drilling approaches of high school to the conversation-based (or communicative) approach of FE. Many can merely say the simplest things in English, such as what their names are, where they come from, their favorite foods and so on. Moreover, the vast majority stay at the same low proficiency level throughout the year, despite five forty-five intensive English classes per week.

If one undertakes a grammar-drilling exercise with them they display some enthusiasm, however when undertaking a conversation-based exercise with them there is much confusion as to what they should do and passivity is often the result. It is impossible to negotiate with them as to how they want to study English, or for them to formulate their own goals, as they have been conditioned over the years that it is the teacher who talks while the students listen. In order to motivate them to talk, and to realize that they acquire English by talking I used the Participation Points System (or PPS).

The PPS was to emphasize the need to practice speaking as much as possible during the classroom activities, students received points in the form of plastic discs during their classroom speaking activities. They would exchange the discs for points at the end of class. The points were recorded and constituted the in-class participation score, which in turn comprised a substantial part of their final grade. This was aimed at encouraging the students to talk, because they were awarded for making endeavors to communicate comprehensively, and points were not taken away for mistakes, although they may have been taken away if the student returned to passivity. The intention was to give students a visible reward for participating. In this way I aimed to help students overcome their concern to follow “right” rules, and say “right” words, and ultimately failing to speak. Whilst this system could have been considered behaviorist, and somewhat unusual with young adults, it proved itself effective in getting very passive students to overcome their shyness to speak in class. Thus I found it to be fairly successful, and the students enjoyed it (Jeffrey, 2004).

I also followed the textbook mostly, and added supplementary exercises where appropriate. However, it is important to note that these students preferred to be told what to do, and would only do what they had been told to do if they actually understood what to do. Thus, tasks were explained a number of times, as simply and generally as slowly as possible. In order to keep things on track I would make the lessons plans very rigid, and would plan for months ahead.

It was impossible to have them understand my teaching philosophy based on ownership of English as non-native speakers and hence my teaching philosophy was not internalized, even when it was translated into Japanese and given to them to read. This I found to be most regretful, but nevertheless expected given their low English proficiencies and general lack of interest in learning it.

HIGHER PROFICIENCY STUDENTS: PREDOMINANTLY TYPE B

However, as mentioned, I currently teach students who are predominantly at the second highest level in FE. I have found a significant difference in their attitude and motivation, in the sense that they are mostly positive about studying English. In general, they are keen to do the conversation exercises and seem to enjoy their English classes more than the lower proficiency students, perhaps for the most obvious reason that they can speak English with more proficiency. As a consequence I do not use the PPS with them (I used to at the beginning of the academic year, but contrary to the lower proficiency students they expressed a preference not to use them).

It is with these students that elaboration on the conversation exercises often occurs, making it possible for me to take a step back and let their experimentation in speaking English unfold more naturally. Interestingly, their higher proficiency is not necessarily the result of having lived in a native-English speaking country for some time. Although some have, there are very proficient English speakers who have acquired their ability in Japan without ever having traveled abroad. When asked how they had acquired such proficiency the majority expressed a sincere interest in English, English culture, or have parents, relatives or friends who speak English. It is important to note that, as in all classes, I do have a share of those who lack motivation and have high absences or have dropped out altogether among the higher proficiency students, but the point being made is that they are in the minority as opposed to the lower proficiency students where they are in the majority.

The three higher proficiency classes I currently teach are Business Level One, Economics Level Two and Law Level Two. In my Business Level One class of 14 students, 10 have had an overseas experience but mostly for only a few days or weeks only (the only exception is one who lived in Australia for over a year). Interestingly, most said they enjoyed their high school English experiences and those who had said they had a native-English teacher in high school who used a communicative approach, as opposed to those who said they had a Japanese English teacher who used a grammar-drilling approach. One important motivational factor for the Business Level One class was that 8 of them are 'hospitality' students (students who will work in the hospitality sector one day, especially in hotels) where they will use their English. Thus they had a sense of transfer as an additional motivating factor. It is important to consider the role of transfer with regard to motivation, ownership and internalization. Brunner (1960: 31) says:

The best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which learning has occurred.

Transfer is the appliance of prior knowledge to fresh learning circumstances (McKeough, 1995), and is frequently viewed as the learning purpose, and the degree to which it takes place is a measure of accomplishment (Pea, 1987 and Perkins, 1991). Ngeow (1998: 1) says:

Research suggests that transfer and motivation are mutually supportive in creating an optimal learning environment. If the learner perceives what he is learning to be relevant and transferable to other situations, he will find learning meaningful, and his motivation to acquire the skill or knowledge will increase.

For transfer to take place, the student must be motivated to do two things: firstly, recognize opportunities for transfer, and secondly, possess motivation to take advantage of recognized opportunities (Prawat, 1989).

The situation is somewhat similar with the Law and Economics Levels Two classes, with the exception that there are no 'hospitality' students in these faculties. The majority had been abroad for a few days or weeks, and were interested in English music and culture, or expressed a will to go abroad at some point in the future. Interestingly, my most proficient and enthusiastic English student has never been abroad and cannot pinpoint the reason why her English is at such a high level of proficiency. Perhaps it is because she is already a part-time English teacher and wishes to be an English teacher in the future, and has been self-motivated to speak English fluently from a young age onwards. It also shows that it is not an indispensable prerequisite to study English in a native-speaking country in order to master proficiency, as long as one has the intrinsic motivation to succeed.

As mentioned, my syllabus with these higher proficiency students leans predominantly towards Type B, where I can act as facilitator and they can formulate their own study goals and techniques with help and encouragement from me, rather than direct intervention. Feedback is very easy to attain with the majority of these higher proficiency students, since it is verbal and instant, and most are open with me about the things they like and dislike. They like the conversation activities most, and since they understand tasks first time around, therefore time spent in conversation is optimized. Most importantly perhaps, is the fact that I can have discussions with these students too. Hence I can explain my teaching philosophy based on ownership of English as an international language and their agreement with this suggests that they have internalized my teaching philosophy without much difficulty and most students seem to understand it or have idea of what I am trying to put across to them in terms of ownership and internalization.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how my syllabus has shifted over the years from being predominantly type A to B, and that the major cause for this has been the level of proficiency and motivation of the students that I have taught and currently teach. I have also changed, again with the level of proficiency of the students and their motivation, from being a benevolently authoritarian teacher to one who is more a facilitator and allowing the students to lead the way in terms of how and what they want to learn and acquire English speaking skills. Perhaps most importantly, with higher proficiency students, it is possible to relate my teaching philosophy of ownership and internalization. In the final analysis, it does indeed seem those circumstances, and primarily the proficiency and motivation level of the students, that determines this. This would seem to confirm Hadley's (2001, 18) quotation mentioned earlier that a syllabus should not necessarily something written on a piece of paper, but rather the adherence to values and assumptions that guide a teacher. It is thus important to regard a syllabus as something flexible and can and should be adapted to suit circumstances, rather than as something rigid and unchangeable. The reason for this is that teachers should focus on setting up students to gain the communication skills that will assist them in life, and thus be flexible, rather than focusing expressly on getting them to

pass a rigid university entrance examination and thereby stick to a rigid and unchangeable syllabus.

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