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OPTION: Syllabus Design

Question 44

Describe and discuss the positive and negative aspects of both Type A and Type B syllabuses, with reference to syllabus sub-types which might characterise either Type. Comment on design, approach, procedures, method, and content aspects in your answer.

1. INTRODUCTION

I am going to answer this question in three parts. Firstly, there will be a brief section relating to the provenance of the terms 'Type A' and 'Type B' in syllabus design. The following sections will comprise detailed examinations of Type A and Type B syllabuses and their sub-syllabuses respectively, incorporating references to both positive and negative aspects of design, approach, procedures, method and contents.

2. 'TYPE A' AND 'TYPE B'

White (1988) uses the terms 'Type A' and 'Type B' to distinguish between what are generally accepted to be extremes on a syllabus design continuum. Similar syllabuses are alternatively referred to by others as 'linguistically-oriented', and 'communicative' syllabuses (Nunan 1988: 10), 'synthetic', and 'analytic' syllabuses (Wilkins cited in Yalden 1987: 31), or, more commonly, product, and process syllabuses (Nunan 1988: 12; 26) respectively.

Thus, whilst White (1988: 92) and Nunan (1988: 12) agree that any given syllabus will probably include such aspects as structure, functions, topics, and situations, their priority within the syllabus will be dictated by the syllabus designer's beliefs and values about language learning (Breen 1984 cited in Nunan 1988: 10; Nunan 1988: 12; White 1988: 45), which in turn, dictate the position of any particular syllabus on the continuum above mentioned.

3. TYPE A SYLLABUSES

White (1988: 45-46; 91; 95) defines Type A syllabuses as interventionist, predetermined, and teacher-led (both in terms of content and classroom interaction). Language content, which forms the focus of the course, is divided up into items which are then selected and graded in terms of linguistic difficulty to comprise lists of objectives (short term), and goals (long term). Student mastery of the items included in these lists is the expected outcome of the course. It can therefore be seen that Nunan's (1988: 159) definition of a 'product syllabus: a syllabus which focuses on the outcomes or end products of a language programme', matches Type A syllabuses well.

3.1 TYPE A SUB-SYLLABUSES

Sub-syllabuses of Type A include: structural, functional-notional syllabuses, situational syllabuses, and topic syllabuses.

The structural syllabus, or grammatical syllabus, as it is sometimes called, is a very common Type A syllabus. These syllabuses focus on form, listing separate linguistic items and grammar rules for students to master (Rutherford 1987: 157; Nunan 1988: 29; Long & Crookes 1993: 13). Criteria such as frequency, and teachability are used in the selection and grading of the grammar content (White 1988: 91).

Functional-notional syllabuses, on the other hand, focus on:

‘...functions [which] may be described as the communicative purposes for which we use language, while notions are the conceptual meanings...expressed through language’ (Nunan 1988: 158).

As well as using different criteria to structural syllabuses for the selection and grading of language (White 1988: 48), functional-notional syllabuses present language in groups, not as separate items. However, it should be noted that when functional-notional syllabuses first appeared many thought they were merely structural syllabuses with a new name (Nunan 1988: 37), maybe because they remain very linear syllabuses (Yalden 1987: 62).

Situational syllabuses and topic syllabuses use graded structures in the form of listed objectives and goals to focus on situations, or topics, respectively (Long & Crookes 1993: 18). Neither situational, nor topic syllabuses have received much attention from writers in this field.

In conclusion of this section on Type A sub-syllabuses it should be remembered that as White (1988: 46) points out:

‘[W]hether the focus is form, function or skills, the basis for such syllabuses remains essentially the same...: it is on objectives to be achieved, content to be learned. Indeed, any such syllabus will be based on lists of items to be learnt...’

3.2 POSITIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE A SYLLABUSES

‘Performance objectives’ (Nunan 1988: 63; 64) can be regarded as a positive aspect of Type A syllabuses since they outline to students what they are expected to do, how they are expected to achieve it, and whether or not they have been successful (White 1988: 73;

Long & Crookes 1993: 12). These objectives also serve as ‘signposts’ (Mager 1975 cited in Nunan 1988: 65; Graves 2001: 181; Nunan & Lamb 2001: 39) which students and teachers can use to determine their progress in their pursuit of their long term goals. Furthermore they prove useful for course organisation (El Nil el Fadil 1985: 96; Nunan & Lamb 2001: 42), and evaluation since they provide clear targets (El Nil el Fadil 1985: 97; 100; Graves 2001: 181). In short, lists, such as those used in Type A syllabuses, facilitate accountability (Holliday 2001: 170).

This use of formal objectives also encourages syllabus designers to think carefully about what it is possible to achieve in class, and consider the linguistic items that students can realistically be expected to master (Gronlund 1981 cited in Nunan 1988: 65; Graves 2001: 182; Nunan & Lamb 2001: 41). Being obliged to formally commit these objectives to paper, means that they are not decided upon on a whim. This approach to objective and goal-setting constitutes a significantly positive aspect of Type A syllabuses; yet, as will be explained below, there are negative aspects involved in this process too.

3.2.1 ADDITIONAL POSITIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE A SUB-SYLLABUSES

In addition to the above, Type A sub-syllabuses include features which have attracted support from writers in the field. For example, the objectives of structural syllabuses are expressed using grammatical structures and rules, and therefore, creating a list of target forms is not seen to be overly problematic (Graves 2001: 184). Functional-notional syllabuses, on the other hand, have been praised by Widdowson (1978 cited in Long & Crookes 1993: 16) for what he refers to as their improvements on structural syllabuses. He claims that functional-notional syllabuses show more authentic and communicative uses of language by providing more of a context for the forms being presented.

Finally, topic syllabuses have received positive comments from those who perceive them to serve as an improvement on structural or functional-notional syllabuses. This view is based upon the idea that topic syllabuses provide more of a context to the lists of linguistic items to be mastered, and thus, are also generally more motivating for learners (White 1988: 73).

3.3 NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE A SYLLABUSES

There has been a lot written about the negative aspects of Type A, product-oriented, syllabuses, which have been called ‘static’ (Long & Crookes 1993: 26), and ‘outmoded and ineffective’ (Long cited in Fotos 1998: 301). However, due to the limited scope of this work, the following will represent a concise, yet comprehensive, summary of the major criticisms made.

Difficulties with grading are characteristic of functional-notional, situational, and topic syllabuses, since clear-cut criteria for this purpose do not exist (White 1988: 77; Long & Crookes 1993: 21; 24). In syllabuses based on lists of target language items, this can be considered a serious failing. Furthermore, it has been noted that the lists used in Type A syllabuses give no clear specification of *how* objectives are to be met; that is they give no instructions of how such items are to be taught (Tyler cited in Nunan 1988: 63). Even well known comprehensive lists like Munby’s (1978 cited in White 1988: 70; 71; 88) suffer from such practical deficiencies.

Type A syllabuses do not reflect Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research findings about the nature of language learning processes (White 1988: 110; Long & Crookes 1993: 15; 26). Research has shown that students learn in what appears to be a non-linear, fixed sequence, at their own pace (Long & Crookes 1993: 14; 15). Thus, the insistence of Type A syllabuses on a linear approach does not recognise, or act upon, these insights into language learning. This should not prove surprising to syllabus designers since it is over twenty years since Widdowson said,

‘...that dividing language into discrete units of whatever type misrepresents the nature of language as communication’ (1979 cited in Nunan 1988: 37).

This is particularly true when commenting on the selection, grading and sequencing carried out in structural syllabuses (Long & Crookes 1993: 13).

SLA research gives no indication that the itemistic presentation of language, with its expectation that students will understand items and add them to their bank of previously learnt knowledge, will aid learning (Long & Crookes 1993: 16; 26-27; McCarthy & Carter 2001: 58). Yet Type A syllabuses have insisted on a continued emphasis on unnatural lists

of isolated target items, merely replacing grammatical items with functions and notions, and continuing to ignore the importance of communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 74; Long & Crookes 1993: 14; 17).

The idea of mastery as used in Type A syllabuses can also be shown to have negative aspects. It has been pointed out that generally these syllabuses concentrate on what is being taught and not on what is being learnt and ignores that there could be a difference (Brumfit 1984 cited in Markee 2001: 121; Tyler cited in Nunan 1988: 63; Nunan 1988: 40; Long & Crookes 1993: 26; Graves 2001: 183). No recognition is given of the fact that despite having been presented with a language item, students may not have learnt it.

Another negative aspect of Type A syllabuses is that in using predetermined content, student needs are ignored (Long & Crookes 1993: 27). The inflexibility of Type A objectives and goals has also been criticised since they remain unalterable throughout the duration of the course, thus failing to take student needs into account at a later date, or indeed the needs of a different cultural context (Rowntree 1981 cited in Nunan 1988: 67; Graves 2001: 183; Nunan & Lamb 2001: 42).

If students' needs are being ignored then the relevance of the syllabus to the students must be questioned (White 1988: 63). This lack of needs analysis would also seem to indicate that Type A syllabuses will suffer from problems of student motivation (Wilkins 1972 cited in Long & Crookes 1993: 14) since if no attempt is made to tailor the course to student needs at least some of the content will be irrelevant to some students.

3.3.1 FURTHER NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE A SYLLABUSES WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO SUB-SYLLABUSES

Long & Crookes point to what they call the 'inefficiency' of the structural syllabus in that it embodies an attempt to teach students all grammar and not just the grammar that they require (1993: 14). This relates once again to the lack of awareness of students' needs as specified above.

Structural syllabuses also suffer criticism because they fail to take the complex nature of language into account and focus solely on one factor: grammar, resulting in its being presented out of context (Nunan 1988: 30; 102-103; Long & Crookes 1993: 13).

Additionally, these syllabuses are criticised for their methods concerning the selection, sequencing, and grading of grammatical items (Rutherford 1987: 159; Nunan 1988: 34) because they clearly demonstrate a lack of awareness of current SLA research.

Functional-notional syllabuses are also seen to have a number of negative aspects: they rely on ‘an item-bank of speech-acts’ (Candlin cited in Yalden 1987: 47) which no empirical evidence exists to support (Long & Crookes 1993: 16; 17), and as a result the selection of functions and notions for the syllabus has been largely intuitive (White 1988: 83). This highlights a fundamental problem with the functional-notional, situational, and topic syllabuses: it is impossible to clearly define functions, notions, situations, or topics (White 1988: 65; 76; Long & Crookes 1993: 23). Therefore, making lists for these syllabuses proves problematic since the categories are not easily divided up into individual functions, notions, situations, or topics, but tend to overlap and merge (Long & Crookes 1993: 16; 23; 24).

There have been instances of hybrid syllabuses combining structural, and functional-notional features in an attempt to circumvent problems with grading functional-notional syllabuses (White 1988: 82), but as no direct form/function correlation exists, grading these syllabuses has proved just as problematic as grading purely functional-notional syllabuses. Long & Crookes (1993: 18), whilst admitting the increasing popularity of hybrid syllabuses, are rather damning in their comments, contending that

‘...the prospects of two unmotivated units combining to produce one motivated hybrid would seem rather dim.’

4. TYPE B SYLLABUSES

Nunan comments that whilst it has been the norm for there to be a distinction made between syllabus design (a focus on outcomes), and methodology (a focus on learning processes through tasks and activities), the division is fading with the appearance of syllabuses which focus on learning as a process, not targets (1988: 10; 52; 158). Thus, Type B syllabuses with their focus on process, not product, on means, not ends, and their rejection of the listing of units of language for examination so typical of Type A, synthetic, syllabuses (White 1988: 96; Long & Crookes 1993: 43) can be seen as syllabuses promoting communicative language skills.

This does not mean that Type B syllabuses do not have goals; only that these goals are different from those of Type A syllabuses (Nunan 1988: 60). As White (1988: 34) takes the initiative to point out:

‘Instead of tightly formulated short-term objectives, general principles are defined and it is these overall, looser aims which provide direction to the curriculum.’

Furthermore, these objectives are not imposed by an authority beyond the classroom as in Type A syllabuses, but negotiated by learners and teachers together both at the beginning of the course and in an on-going dialogue which enables the syllabus to adjust to the students’ needs (White 1988: 44-47; 95; Long & Crookes 1993: 12; McDonough & C. Shaw 1993: 60). This is typical of the non-interventionist, learner-centred Type B syllabuses with their focus on the contribution that the learner can make to the learning process.

Type B syllabuses all use task-based processes and there has been a lot of debate on what a task is exactly, but for the purposes of this paper I shall assume Nunan’s definition:

‘task: a unit of planning/teaching containing language data and an activity or sequence of activities to be carried out by the learner on the data’ (1988: 159).

Tasks are used in these syllabuses as lists are used in Type A syllabuses. The selection and grading in Type B syllabuses is ‘roughly tuned’ in terms of task difficulty and successful task completion is decided by teacher and students together (White 1988: 45-47; Long & Crookes 1993: 12).

4.1 TYPE B SUB-SYLLABUSES

Sub-syllabuses of Type B include: process syllabuses, procedural syllabuses, and syllabuses based on Task-Based Language Teaching. All of these syllabuses use language for a purpose and not (solely) for the ends of learning linguistic items (Richards, Platt & Weber 1985 cited in Nunan 1988: 42). The following quote about these three syllabuses taken from Yalden supports this:

‘All come via different paths to similar conclusions about language teaching: that the teacher’s concern should be primarily with the route, not the goal – with what Richterich has called the “learner’s trajectory” (Richterich et al 1981). Along the way, procedures of linguistic syllabus design are considered marginally important if not irrelevant’ (1987: 74-75).

The Process syllabus is based on an idea developed by Breen & Candlin (cited in Long & Crookes 1993: 33). It characterises a typical Type B syllabus with its focus on the learner, and emphasis on the negotiation of syllabus content, and the learning process (White 1988: 98; 100; Long & Crookes 1993: 33; 34; Gray 1990: 262; Breen and Candlin 2001: 20).

The procedural syllabus, as demonstrated by Prabhu in The Bangalore Project, is based on the idea that students learn about structure as well as communication, but unconsciously, whilst they are focusing on meaning and the task they are involved in (Brumfit 1984; Yalden 1987: 65; White 1988: 102; 103; Long & Crookes 1993: 29). This lack of a direct focus on form is intended. Prabhu stated that students need to learn language rules for themselves in accordance with their own rate of learning, a stance supported by SLA research (White 1988: 96; 104; 106; Long & Crookes 1993: 31).

Tasks in the procedural syllabus are decided upon in advance. Tasks to be attempted in class are selected by judging whether or not half of the class will be able to complete half of the task successfully (White 1988: 107).

The third, and final, Type B syllabus is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) which stresses the importance of using tasks in the learning context with specified objectives that reflect the real-world context that students will face outside the classroom (Long & Crookes 1993: 39). This syllabus therefore involves careful content selection and incorporates needs analysis to help in the choice of appropriate tasks (White 1988: 95; Long & Crookes 1993: 41).

4.2 POSITIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE B SYLLABUSES

According to White, Type B syllabuses all attempt to allow for ‘...flexibility and growth...’ (1988: 92) since despite their somewhat differing approaches to process learning their methodology is the same (1988: 94).

The involvement of the student in syllabus design shows an understanding of the insights provided by SLA research, as does the exposure of students to chunks of language not lists. Students are encouraged to follow their own learning sequence, not that of a preordained syllabus that does not interest them.

4.2.1 ADDITIONAL POSITIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE B SUB-SYLLABUSES

With reference to TBLT J.Willis (1996: 60) maintains that due to their involvement in the selection process of syllabus content students are motivated because they find the tasks interesting. This could be applied to all Type B syllabuses as defined by White (1988).

Additionally, TBLT recognises the importance of SLA research findings concerning language learning, materials and resources , and includes a focus on form after the completion of the task (Long & Crookes 1993: 38; 41; J.Willis 1996: 52; 60; Skehan 1996: 26). In this way grammatical features are included in an otherwise process-oriented syllabus, albeit in the background. Fotos (1998: 306) refers to this combination of meaning and form as ‘...task use for providing a communicative focus on form...’ In this way, this syllabus incorporates possible goals as a guideline within its task-based teaching plans (Skehan 1996: 28).

4.3 NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE B SYLLABUSES

There is a lack of empirical evidence supporting Type B syllabuses as none of them have been extensively evaluated in action (White 1988: 110; Long & Crookes 1993: 43). In addition to this, the grading and sequencing of tasks continues to be problematic since there is a lack of consensus on the criteria for determining task difficulty (Nunan 1988: 133; Long & Crookes 1993: 36; 42; 43). As Nunan (1988: 48) comments:

‘[T]he problem for the task-based syllabus designer is that a variety of factors will interact to determine task difficulty.’

It should also be remembered that task difficulty will differ from student to student making the grading of tasks even more complex. This constitutes a significant negative aspect of Type B syllabuses since grading, as has been seen in the discussion of Type A syllabuses, forms an important part of syllabus design.

Doyle (cited in Nunan 1988: 46) was among the first to advocate a task-based curriculum yet he stresses that tasks need to *specify* the outcome expected, the process students are expected to follow, and the resources available. The fact of the matter is that there continues to be an expectation of teachers to provide targets (both objectives and goals), and as a result, although the process of learning is increasingly recognised as being important, accountability remains a priority (Mosback 1984; Yalden 1987: 74-75; Lewis 2001: 48).

4.3.1 FURTHER NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TYPE B SYLLABUSES WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO SUB-SYLLABUSES

In the procedural syllabus developed by Prabhu (White 1988: 107) many problems become apparent with regard to the lack of information supplied on task selection, grading, sequencing, and evaluation (Nunan 1988: 44; Long & Crookes 1993: 32). It is not clearly explained how it was decided that the level of the task was appropriate for half of the class to complete half of the task without difficulties and this presents problems for those who wish to adopt a procedural syllabus. Also unavailable are clear instructions concerning criteria for deciding whether or not the task had been successful, and what 'successful' entailed.

This lack of concrete evidence concerning selection and evaluation, when added to the fact that the number of different tasks is infinite (Long & Crookes 1993: 42; 43) lends a vagueness to Type B syllabuses which attracts negative comments. It also makes replication of The Bangalore Project, whether for evaluation of the syllabus type or purely for teaching purposes, extremely difficult (Brumfit 1984; Greenwood 1985).

Further criticism of Type B syllabuses concerns both process and procedural syllabuses, in which outcomes are generally unpredictable due to the fact that they are unpremeditated (Yalden 1987: 75). Beretta & Davies (cited in White 1988: 108), commenting on The Bangalore Project, say that a lack of specific goals can lead to a syllabus becoming incoherent, which could be applied not only to the procedural syllabus, but also to the process syllabus. White (1988: 102) is less complimentary:

‘Although the process model does not advocate ignoring aims, the emphasis on process and procedures rather than on outcomes could result in an aimless journey...a pedagogical magical mystery tour...’

Candlin (cited in Long & Crookes 1993: 33) has pointed out that when using a process-oriented syllabus,

‘...what...[it]...really consists of can only be discerned after a course is over, by observing not what was planned, but what took place.’

Whilst this may prove more appealing than a syllabus with no goals at all as mentioned above, this ‘retrospective syllabus’ (White 1988: 97) would still not find favour with those who value accountability. Furthermore, this lack of premeditation concerning goal

identification is understood by some to indicate a lack of needs analysis. This being the case, it would make the choice of tasks used appear arbitrary (Long & Crookes 1993: 32; 36 attracting further criticism.

Type B syllabuses in general, recognise the importance of insights provided by SLA research and yet, despite empirical evidence showing a focus on form to be important, both process and procedural syllabuses lack this emphasis (Long & Crookes 1993: 33; 36). They concentrate firmly on the processes, the meaning of language and steadfastly reject any overt acknowledgement of the grammatical forms also involved.

Process syllabuses have attracted a high level of criticism in their own right. White (1988: 101) claims that some of Breen & Candlin's ideas are 'utopian proposals' and would prove problematic to implement. He lists the unrealistically high competence levels which the process syllabus supposes all teachers and students to have, the role changes advocated with their attendant effects on the balance of power within the classroom which would create difficulties in some cultures, and the materials and resources necessary to implement the syllabus. As White (1988: 101; 102) makes clear, moving away from a syllabus which relies on a single textbook as its basis, to a syllabus which demands a bank of resources may not be practicable for a time-challenged teacher, or a teacher lacking the necessary skills to create and work with a range of materials.

Task-based syllabuses, like process and procedural syllabuses, also suffer criticism for their evaluation techniques: tasks are deemed to have been successful if the teacher and the students perceive them to have been, but no formal criteria upon which to base such a decision appear to exist. Nunan (1988: 47) goes so far as to speculate that

‘...it could be argued that any proposal failing to offer criteria for grading and sequencing can hardly claim to be a syllabus at all.’

Others are not so extreme, but do, nonetheless, accept that the lack of a formal evaluation structure in Type B syllabuses is, at the very least, problematic (White 1988: 101; Long & Crookes 1993: 35).

Criticism of TBLT is not as extensive as that concerning process and procedural syllabuses, yet it should be remembered that research into TBLT, providing an evaluation of the syllabus, is lacking and, therefore, in discussing its merits or otherwise involves

talking about something that shows promise, but has not been tested thoroughly (Long & Crookes 1993: 42; 43).

Despite their negative aspects, Type B syllabuses are aptly described by Long & Crookes (1993: 44) when they say that,

‘[W]hile still in need of controlled field testing, task-based language teaching shows some potential as an integrated approach to program design, implementation and evaluation.’

In comparison with Type A syllabuses, Type B syllabuses are still relatively new and time is needed to allow for action research in the field.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been seen that both Type A and Type B syllabuses have positive and negative aspects. The main points concerning Type A syllabuses are that they provide clear goals and objectives, but ignore SLA research in treating language and the learning process in a linear way, compiling lists of linguistic items, and expecting students to master these items. Student needs and their motivation are also ignored.

The main points concerning Type B syllabuses, on the other hand, are that they show an awareness of SLA research and recognise the importance of the language learning process in their methods. Student motivation is largely recognised to be higher than when Type A syllabuses are adopted, since tasks engage the interest of the students. However, they lack empirical evidence to support them, and in the majority of cases are seen to forfeit a focus on form and accountability in their approach to selection, grading, evaluation and targets.

During the course of this paper it has been possible to appreciate what White (1988: 90) refers to as ‘...the conflict between language teaching as training for ordained outcomes on the one hand and education for unexpected outcomes on the other.’ Yet it would appear to be generally accepted that ‘[T]here are clear disadvantages...to an extreme focus in either direction’ (Seedhouse 1997: 338), as there are a growing number of writers in the field who believe, as Nunan & Lamb (2001: 29) do, that ‘...language programs should have twin goals: language content goals and learning process goals.’ Xiaoju (1984: 7; 8), Seedhouse (1997: 338), and Nunan (1998: 109) call for a syllabus providing a balance between these elements; A M. Shaw (1982: 84; 86; 87) proposes a flexible, modular syllabus, and McDonough & C. Shaw (1993: 294) suggest that a ‘multi-syllabus’ based on

more than one methodology could provide a solution. Even White, who states that the ‘...basic incompatibility between Type A and Type B which might make some combinations or compromises unworkable’ (1988: 109), admits that hybrid, or proportional syllabuses may prove a useful ‘compromise’ (1988: 110; 111) for teachers who wish, for whatever reason, to combine elements of both product and process-oriented syllabuses.

Whatever their title, syllabuses will continue to give priority to different aspects of language learning and in so doing, reveal their position on the Type A – Type B continuum (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 20; White 1988: 92). Yet hopefully, such issues will not prevent practising teachers, when they are able to choose, from using a syllabus which reflects their own methodological standpoint whilst providing their students with an appropriate course for their needs.

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