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# Syllabus Types in a Korean Context

Syllabus and Materials

Question SM/03/02

R.V. White in *The ELT Curriculum* (1988, Oxford: Blackwell) draws a distinction between 'Type A' (content-oriented, i.e. "What is to be learnt?") and 'Type B' (learning-oriented, i.e. "How is it to be learnt?") syllabuses. To what extent does the syllabus you work with conform to one or the other of these 'types'? How appropriate/ satisfactory do you consider a 'Type A' or 'Type B' syllabus to be, for your own working context?

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# Syllabus Types in a Korean Context

# 1 Introduction

Before we walk into a classroom, we must have some notion of how we will conduct the lesson. This notion forms the basis of our syllabus. Such a syllabus may be very detailed, or quite broad, and of any number of types.

Below, I will first review syllabus types, particularly White's Type A and B distinction, and then consider my own syllabus in terms of these types. Following that, I will consider what characteristics to consider when determining the appropriateness of a given syllabus type in a given context. Lastly, I will consider, the appropriateness of a Type A and B syllabus to my teaching context of a private language school for adults in Seoul, Korea.

# 2 Syllabus Types

2.1 General Syllabuses Characteristics

In keeping with the British tradition, White considers a curriculum to be the "totality of content taught and aims to be realized within one school or educational system" and further considers syllabuses as the "content or subject matter of an individual subject", however he suggests for many reasons that a curriculum should not be seen as an extended syllabus (1988:4). Syllabuses vary in many aspects. Some are very short and barely readable, while others are lengthy and neatly bound (Taylor 1970:32 in White 1988:3). While this range is great, White suggests that a consensus exists as to the characteristics of a syllabus, which Brumfit (1984a in White 1988:3) summarized as:

1. A syllabus is the specification of the work of a particular department in a school or college, organized in subsections defining the work of a particular group or class;
2. It is often linked to time, and will specify a starting point and ultimate goal;
3. It will specify some kind of sequence based on
      a) sequencing intrinsic to a theory of language learning or to the structure of specified material relatable to language acquisition;
      b) sequencing constrained by administrative needs, e.g. materials;
4. It is a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds and so is negotiable and adjustable;
5. It can only specify what is taught; it can not specify what is learnt;
6. It is a public document and an expression of accountability.

2.2 Type A Syllabuses

White classifies syllabuses into two broad categories. The first are Type A syllabuses, which derive from Reconstructionism and are related to systems-behavioural learning. Systems-behavioural learning assumes that with enough time and a carefully organized learning experience, students will be able master the subject (White 1988:25). Structural syllabuses, Notational-Functional syllabuses, Situational syllabuses, Topic Based syllabuses, Skills syllabuses (White 1988), Lexical syllabuses, and numerous derivations of such syllabuses are classified as Type A syllabuses.

White summarizes Type A syllabuses as having "an interventionist approach which gives priority to the pre-specification of linguistic or other content or skill objectives" (White 1988:45). In Type A syllabuses, the content and its organization, the what is to be learnt, is the main organizing factor, and such content is "a gift to the learner from the teacher or knower" (White 1988:44). While a number of different methodologies may be employed with a Type A syllabus to assist learning, the student is still expected to have mastered a pre-specified selection of points at some future stage.

Type A syllabuses share the characteristics of careful selection and grading of materials. For a Structural syllabus selection and grading is typically based on concepts such as coverage, complexity, learnability (White 1988:51), and more recently views on the natural order of acquisition. However, these may conflict and some evidence exists that distancing the teaching of some related structures could be beneficial as it would prevent interference (White 1988:54).

For a Notational-Functional syllabus, selection and grading is largely based on need, utility, complexity, and coverage (White 1988:78). In a Situational syllabus the linguistic needs of a situation are considered instead of specifying general language needs. While a Lexical syllabus forms a fresh way of organizing the language, it is still inherently a content based approach as can be seen in *COBUILD Book 1* (Willis 1988), which selects and grades new vocabulary to explore in each chapter. White considers a Skills syllabus to be somewhat different from the above types (White 1988:94), yet such a syllabus would still consists of a graded selection of skills to learn, and thus be a Type A syllabus.

Selection and grading is complicated in some syllabus models such as a Topic Based syllabus, or Situational syllabus by the difficulty in delineating the base unit of the syllabus. Thus, this difficulty with a situation such as 'at the bank' may place practical limits on the pure realization of some syllabuses types.

2.3 Type B Syllabuses

White's second classification is Type B syllabuses, which are derived from progressivism. Progressivism is based on looking at the world and acting upon it (Freire 1973 and 1976 in White 1988:25), and an educational environment that promotes the creation of ideas and feelings, instead of simply exchanging them (Crawford-Lange 1982:89 in White 1988:25). The second point is significant as it contradicts the notion of the teacher as the all knowing expert and content as "a gift to the learner" (White 1988:44), a fundamental aspect of Type A syllabuses.

Process (Negotiated) and Procedural syllabuses are classified as Type B syllabuses (White 1988:94). Common to both is that they are process, how learning is done, based and thus methodologies that promote the goals of progressivism take the primary position in organizing the learning experience. For these syllabuses, the teacher is considered more of an assistant than a provider of sanctioned information. A further similarity is that the syllabus of linguistic factors covered can only be specified after the course has been completed due to the differences in the students' learning experiences, unlike in a Type A syllabus in which the content is pre-specified.

As 'process' is used in two distinct ways, one to indicate the process of learning, "the how something is done" (Clark 1991), and the other as a Process syllabus, this could cause confusion and it seems clearer to use the term 'Negotiated syllabus' as Clarke (1991) has done when referring to a Process syllabus. Additionally, as Prabhu's Procedural syllabus is based on individual work units consisting of tasks which fit Bygate, Skehan and Swain's definition of a task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (2001:11 in Skehan 2003), his Procedural syllabus will be considered alongside a Task Based syllabus.

2.3.1 Negotiated Syllabus

The principle underlying a Negotiated syllabus is that the teacher and students come together to discuss aspects of the course and form a consensus about how the course will be conducted. The 'how learning is done' is realized not by the teaching methodologies or materials directly, but in the control that students have over them.

Clarke notes "a Negotiated syllabus could end up becoming any one of the various syllabus types mentioned" (1991). Thus, while it is highly unlikely, it is possible for students to negotiate a Structural syllabus and be consistently satisfied with the implementation of such, thus providing a syllabus identical to a typical Structural syllabus. However, the student control through negotiating that syllabus provides the fundamentally different foundation, and thus the basis for describing it as a Type B syllabus.

2.3.2 Procedural/Task Based Syllabus

While Task Based instruction is related to a communicative teaching methodology (Skehan 2003), the work of others, notably Prabhu suggests that tasks do not need to be communicative to be beneficial. Prabhu's premise was that the conscious effort of doing tasks promoted subconscious development of the linguistic system (Prabhu 1987 p69-70 in White 1988:104). In a communicative methodology, tasks are considered valuable because they encourage the learner to negotiate, rephrase, modify, and experiment with language, all of which are considered necessary for language acquisition (Richards 2001:228). Despite the different focuses above, both propose that it is the use of language that promotes acquisition.

Prabhu's Procedural syllabus used a series of graded tasks that students completed to develop their language system. Tasks were considered successful if 50 percent of students were about 50 percent successful (1987 in White 1988:107). This complements the general assumption that tasks can be graded according to difficulty (Feez 1998:17 in Richards 2001:224). In contrast to Type A syllabuses, Type B syllabuses do not contain pre-selected materials graded for optimal acquisition.

2.4 Benefits and Drawbacks of Each Syllabus Type

Type A syllabuses have a number of benefits, one of which is that they are more easily and quickly testable, often with objective multiple-choice tests. As well, Type A syllabus will also provide students with knowledge about the language, which may be necessary for tests such as the TOEIC. However, a drawback is that this knowledge about language does not necessarily result in an ability to communicate effectively when needed (Ellis 1984 in White 1988:46). Conversely, evidence suggests that while a Type B syllabus may promote the ability to use language, it may also results in a lowered ability to access knowledge about the language (Beretta and Davies 1985:125 in White 1988:108).

Type A syllabuses also have the benefit of providing students with some feeling for the size of the English ocean, and perhaps for a bewildered student, a route to travel. I would further suggest that for many students in a classroom situation, knowledge of what they must know on the last day of class to receive a reasonable grade is comforting and perhaps motivating. A Negotiated (Process) syllabus with its undefined goals is at risk of becoming "a pedagogical magical mystery tour" (White 1988:102), a risk that it appears may also apply to Task Based syllabuses.

In a Negotiated syllabus, the major benefits seem to be that the students are given control over their learning and some autonomy to develop their English in ways that are valuable to them. However, a Negotiated syllabus seems to presume that students want to learn, and it is hard to imagine it working well in a situation in which students are compelled to learn a second language. Clarke (1991) notes a number of other practical concerns about the use of a Negotiated syllabus. A notable one is the almost impossibility of having a group of students who have the same language learning goals and styles. A second is that in some cultures, negotiation may be culturally inappropriate and students may want and expect a teacher led class.

While a benefit derived from a Task Based syllabus is that instead of providing knowledge about a language it promotes language competence (White 1988:110), it has also been suggested that without some focus on form, students may fail to sustain their linguistic development (Long 1991 in Skehan 1996).

# 3 A Mixed Syllabus In Use

3.1 Implied Syllabus

In analyzing my syllabus in terms of White's Type A and B distinction, I was unable to obtain a copy of the formal syllabus, and used the less formal Student Level Requirements document, the end of level tests, and the textbook indexes to establish my syllabus type. Samples from each respectively form Appendixes A, B and C.

The Student Level Requirements are organized into three categories; structure, listening, and speaking. Structure goals range from "Simple present; yes no questions" in level one to "Future perfect and future continuous tenses" in level six. Listening goals range from "Can understand and react to simple commands e.g. stand up and sit down" in level one to "Can understand main ideas from television news and documentaries" in level six. Speaking goals similarly range from "Can ask simple questions for personal information" in level one to "Can use complex If... sentences to describe imaginary activities and situations" in level six. The listening and speaking goals indicate both skills and functional objectives alongside grammatical control over the spoken language.

The end of level tests used in my school contain sixty questions. The first twenty-five are multiple choice listening comprehension questions, the next twenty-five are multiple choice structure questions, and the final ten assess reading comprehension. While the listening and reading sections often require students to manipulate information and employ other language skills to select the correct answer, the tests have a large grammatical component.

In evaluating my textbooks, I considered one representative book from each of the three series of books used: *Talk It Up 1* (Holmes 2003), for level one; *Stairway 2* (Rogers 2003b), for level two; and *In Focus 2* (Rogers 2003a), for level five. The table below lists two sample units with their objectives from the textbooks' indexes for each of the three textbooks.

## TABLE 3.1: SAMPLE OF TEXT BOOK INDEXES

| Text | Unit | Unit Title | Structure | Function | Topic | Listening / Pronunciation |
|------|------|-----------|-----------|----------|-------|---------------------------|
| Talk It Up 1 | 1 | Greetings: Introducing yourself and others | Verb: *to be,* Possessives: *me, your his, her, our, their* | | | |
| " | 13 | Asking for and giving directions | Imperatives | | | |
| Stairway 3 | 1 | Too many questions | Yes/no questions | Asking for/giving personal information | | Meeting people Personal information |
| " | 6 | You can do anything | Can('t)/(don't) have to | Talking about ability/obligation Making suggestions | | Family life: children's responsibilities |
| In Focus 2 | 3 | What Would You Do? | If... Sentences, Which and Hope | Discussing hypothetical situations, Making plans, imagining, making decisions | Wishes and Hopes, Fantasies, Emergencies and Disasters | |
| " | 4 | Sound Advice | Phrasal verbs | Explaining, Asking for and giving advice, Discussing cultural and general differences, Reaching a consensus | Proverbs, Manners and Etiquette, Crime and Punishment | |

In the above textbooks, some objectives are not defined in all textbook indexes, and in Stairway 2, function and topic have been merged. The topic heading of In Focus 2 does not parallel White's (1988:65) description of a Topic Based syllabus in that it did not introduce new non-linguistic material to broaden the general knowledge of the students. As hinted at by the heading of Topic/Function in Stairway 2, it seems that the use of topic is more of a super category of related functions than an independent organizing principle. In Stairway 2, the listening/pronunciation header, as well as the speaking and listening category of the student level requirements for each level indicate that language skills have been considered when compiling the syllabus.

From the above, it is noted that each text book unit contains discrete grammar points, that direct grammar questions consist of over 40 percent of the tests, and that the student level requirements consist of about 30 percent grammar points. This strong structural component implies that the syllabus I use is structurally based with a secondary notational-functional organization, and an awareness of skills objectives. As all three are Type A syllabuses, my syllabus is clearly a Type A syllabus.

3.2 A Hybrid Syllabuses In Use

Most teachers in my school initially have little or no teacher training or teaching experience and are unaware of the Student Level Requirements document for each level. Teachers simply use the textbooks to teach their classes, thus the formal syllabus is effectively implemented through the textbooks. However, to maintain enrollment, teachers are encouraged to make the class interesting and use additional materials as needed from the school's large supplementary materials library. The supplementary materials include books like *Move Up Resource Pack Pre-Intermediate* (Kay 1997), *Pair Work 1* (Watcyn-Jones 1997), and *Discussions A-Z* (Wallwork 1997). While these materials may have structural or functional aspects detailed in the teachers' notes, these tasks are often chosen because it is felt that interacting with the materials will help the students overcome obstacles, develop skills, or build fluency.

In my teaching context, textbooks are generally used two or three days a week and other activities are utilized on the other days. As our school's syllabus is a structure based Type A syllabus, the supplementary materials library and teaching practices effectively introduces a parallel but independent task based Type B syllabus, resulting in a hybrid syllabus.

# 4 Appropriateness Considerations

In discussing appropriateness, it is important to consider how appropriateness can be evaluated. As my students are not blank slates on which the theoretically best syllabus type can be implemented, I shall consider that the most appropriate syllabus type is the one that results in the most overall improvement in my students based on their needs while respecting their expectations.

4.1 Student Needs

Student needs can be evaluated based on the purpose for learning English. In Prabhu's CTP, students who learned in a form focused class did better on form focused work, and students who learned in a meaning focused class performed better on meaning focused work (Beretta and Davies 1985:125 in White 1988:108). This fits with Ellis's contention that a Type A syllabus provides analytical knowledge about a language and that a Type B syllabus provides language that is readily usable to the learner (Ellis 1984 in White 1988:46). While I feel that

the best way to pass a grammar based test is to be able to use the language, a point supported in Krashen (2004), it may eventually be resolved that the best way to quickly pass a grammar based test is to study a grammar based Type A syllabus.

It must also be noted that some students are either not learning English for any specific reason, or that the reason for learning is too distant to be clear, or too broad based to focus on a single reason. Such students could respectively be a Korean housewives learning as a hobby, a young child in an English Kindergarten, and a recent immigrant to an English speaking country. In each of these cases, needs would differ and perhaps a needs assessment would be required for clarification.

4.2 Student Expectations

Appropriateness also involves the interaction of needs and expectations. It is hard to imagine students who have spent six or more years studying grammar and score well on a test such as the TOEIC, needing to learn more grammar. Yet many Korean students still expect they must study grammar to improve their English abilities (e.g. Li 2001). Even for students who expect to learn communicatively, there may be an underlying expectation for structural instruction.

Student expectations are important because if students are only given what they need, with disregard for their expectations, it is possible that the contradiction of expectations could have negative results, such as a loss of professional respect and trust in the teacher. Although motivation is a very complicated aspect of learning, there is evidence that it affects student outcomes (Brown 1994:33), and it is not difficult to suggest that a loss of professional respect or trust in a teacher could affect a student's motivation, at least in a particular class, and result in lowered learning outcomes. Considering this, the entire catalogue of student expectations is an important consideration when determining the appropriateness of a syllabus type.

4.3 Understanding Expectations and Needs

Student needs and expectations are extremely variable. Students may need different syllabus types at different levels or for different learning purposes (White 1988:110). It is also easy to imagine that students may have differing expectations for many reasons including their educational experiences, their length time of studying English, their attitude towards English, any previous learner training, and any experience studying abroad.

Presuming that teachers can comprehend even part of the myriad of student needs and expectations, the teachers job seems to be to give the students as much of the syllabus that best matches the students' needs as possible, but not too much, as that could cause student expectations to be contradicted and lead to a reduction in learner outcomes.

In a recent paper promoting his Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, Krashen (2004) suggests, "it is our professional responsibility to teach according to our convictions about how people acquire language". From this, he directly refutes the suggestion that student expectations should have any bearing on teaching practices if the teacher feels such goes against the best way to learn. He further suggests that learner training should be employed to overcome these issues. While this is an admirable point, it seems to fail to recognize that a single teacher can not change a learning culture, and that such change is slow at best. It seems our job is not to teach for our convictions, it is to teach for our students. Thus, learner training may help the teacher shift the balance point of expectations and needs more towards student needs, yet the teacher must remain aware that a balance point may always exist.

## 5 Appropriateness of Type A and B Syllabuses in My Teaching Context

My teaching context is a private Korean language school teaching adult students in classes ranging from 5 to 14 students. The majority of classes are conversation classes, yet as noted above, there is a structural foundation to such classes.

5.1 Appropriateness Based on Needs

I would classify approximately half of my students as needing English for communicative purposes with examples including university students preparing to study their major abroad, and people working for multinational companies. A further forty percent of my students are people who feel English skills are important, but are unsure how it will benefit them, while the remaining ten percent are studying for a variety of other reasons. Despite my students' differences, I believe the majority will need to be able to use English well, as opposed to simply pass a test. In most cases, my students have already extensively studied English and can be characterized as having a broad structural and lexical knowledge, but a somewhat limited ability to use this knowledge in a conversational situation. This may be due to an educational system which almost exclusively uses a Type A syllabus and focuses on teaching

to pass explicit knowledge based tests such as the TOEIC or The Korean University Entrance Test, and de-emphasizes non-tested abilities.

In considering needs, I must first note that most of my students need English for both language tests, and communicative purposes. However, as my students have enrolled in a conversation class, already have an extensive knowledge of grammar and test taking strategies, have ample opportunities to learn grammar, yet are deficient in their ability to use that knowledge communicatively, and have few other opportunities to develop communicative competence, I see that my role should be to assist with their communicative competence, and not to increase their explicit grammatical knowledge of English. This is reinforced by my syllabus, which although structurally based, contains grammar rules already familiar to the students, and my relative inability to effectively teach explicit grammatical knowledge or test taking strategies. However, I hope my work to increase my students' communicative competence will also contribute towards an increase in their test scores. Considering my teaching environment, I feel a Type B syllabus with negotiation to allow students to explore their concerns and interests, and tasks to allow them to develop competency and overcome limitations would be most appropriate.

5.2 Appropriateness Based on Expectations

As my Korean students have enrolled in a conversation course to improve their spoken English, none expect a typical Korean high school style English classroom. Some students are weary of structural based instruction and expect to improve their ability to use English exclusively through practice and error correction. For these students, a Task Based or Negotiated syllabus may be appropriate, however care would need to be taken as most Korean students still expect a teacher led classroom.

Many other students also expect to improve their fluency by using language and do not want to do structural work, but also feel that structural work is necessary for successful learning, or feel, perhaps based on previous learning experiences, that a good language teacher presents grammar lessons even if the student does not like grammar. One of my errors four years ago when I started teaching was not being aware of the expectation for structural work among students who professed they did not want to do structural work. For these students, a Structural syllabus, or another Type A syllabus such as a Notational-Functional syllabus from which they can extract structures to study would appear most appropriate.

While most of my students seem to be seeking aspects of communicative learning, for some students, a Type A syllabus still seems most appropriate as it meets their additional expectations for a structural foundation. For other students, a task based Type B syllabus would seem most appropriate as it matches their expectations to improve their English through use in a teacher directed class. Based on student expectations, it appears neither a Type A nor B syllabus is fully appropriate for any individual class due to differences among my students.

5.3 Hybrid Syllabuses

As neither syllabus type is fully appropriate for my teaching context, a syllabus with a structural component to satisfy some expectations, while presenting lessons from a Task Based syllabus to develop language competence would seem the most appropriate balance for the majority of my students. Additionally, if the structural component is made as salient as possible, less time may be needed to fulfill student expectations for structural instruction.

White discusses combining different syllabus types when he notes that many syllabuses will be organized using aspects of all five Type A models (1988:92). Alternating between syllabus models is suggested in Yalden's communicative Structural-Functional Proportional syllabus, with her last model including an unspecified component, which could be used for tasks (1983 in White 1988:79). White notes that there are some inherent incompatibilities between Type A and B syllabuses that may make some combinations impossible (1988:109), yet perhaps a teacher could successfully employs a hybrid syllabus with content based instruction to satisfy some expectations at times and methodological based instruction to satisfy other expectations and perceived needs at other times. In a mixed group of students "a hybrid or Proportional syllabus would provide a valuable and viable compromise" (White 1988:83). For the student, it is hard to imagine how a hybrid syllabus is fundamentally different than enrolling in a class with a Task Based syllabus three days a week and an independent TOEIC class two days a week.

An alternative to a hybrid syllabus is to engage in learner training to attempt to align student needs and expectations. Although learner training would not be an immediate solution, if successful it could in some ways allow teachers to post the syllabus on the door and let students enter the classroom that best suits them.

# 6 Conclusion

The classification of Type A syllabuses, with their content orientation, and Type B syllabuses, with their learning orientation provides a useful way to understand syllabus characteristics. Analyzing my syllabus as a primarily Structural syllabus with a secondary level of functional organization allows me a clearer understanding of my class procedures, and a clear basis for more effectively manipulating the materials to improve my students' learning outcomes.

Just as it is hard to imagine any classroom having a strictly Type A or B syllabus, it seems that few of my students are oriented to either a pure Type A or Type B syllabus. The needs of many of my students would seem best met with a Type B syllabus, while their expectations suggest aspects of a Type A syllabus are required. Perhaps the most appropriate syllabus in my teaching context is a hybrid one that makes the shortest grammar lesson as prominent as possible, and then switches to a more communicative approach. As with many other aspects of the ELT field, it seems no extreme, either a purely Type A or purely Type B syllabus is the most appropriate, and we need to find a comfortable compromise for our diverse students.

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# Appendix 1

Student Level Requirements Document: levels one to six

## Appendix 2

Level Two Test

# Appendix 3

Sample ELS Text book indexes:

A - Talk It Up 1 (Holmes 2003)
B - Stairway 2 (Rogers 2003b)
C - In Focus 2 (Rogers 2003a)