Challenges of Language Syllabus Design in EFL/ESL Contexts

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Abstract—**Nowadays with widespread use of English language in different countries and its teaching, the main concern of teachers, syllabus designers, policy makers, institutions are to design course materials which can fulfil students language needs appropriately, however designing such a course material is a daunting task. In this paper the researcher tries to shed light on the major concerns of authority in the field regarding EFL/ESL course designing. The researcher tries to explore the ideas of major authority in the field of language teaching and learning and also applied linguists toward the issue of material development in English language teaching classes. Since every student is unique and his/her need is totally different with his classmate, so finding the trade-off between such varieties of needs is demanding and complicated task. Finally the researcher came with this idea that the teachers should think globally and act locally; in that majority of course books are written in other countries, there are certain conditions in which the teachers have to do amendments in order to meet the needs of their own learners.**

Index Terms—**syllabus design, curriculum development, teacher inactment**

Nunan (1988) mentions that there is a great deal of disagreement within the teaching profession on the nature of language and learning. As a consequence, we must decide to select material and components from all angles and perspectives.. He further ratifies that the dire need to make decisions the contents on and choices of materials in deciding what to do include in or omit from specifications of content and which elements are to be the basic building blocks of the syllabus, presents syllabus designers with constant problems. Masuhara (1993) asserts that teachers can even be said to play an indispensible role in the development of materials for their learners and classroom's, and also their role in materials development is very crucial in the post method era.. Richards & Rodgers (2003) mentions that the majority of studies thus far on teachers' variables have focused on their roles in acting as the facilitator of learning and language model provider. Teachers appear to be often regarded and treated as passive beings in both language teaching and language learning. They are often expected to adapt flexibly to the roles determined by the objectives of the method and by the learning theory on which the method is based. Richards & Rodgers (2003) declare that the lack of studies on teacher variables seems distressing in that teachers are in a fundamental position in language teaching and learning and are often anticipated to be in charge of essential stages of curriculum development. The teachers' role in designing materials is very crucial. (Dublin and Olshtain, 1992). Cunningsworth (1998) mentions that the main role of teachers in regard to the choice of the course book is recognized as a guide, a facilitator, and a monitor. The teacher is seen as guiding learners through the learning process, with support from the course book, and monitoring student progress, correcting errors when this is useful for the learning process. Cunningsworth (1998) also asserts that prediction of learning and teaching for teachers are a daunting task, and even teachers, no matter how well they know their classes, often need to make adjustments to their planned lessons so as to provide somewhere to stay an unexpected difficulty faced while teaching an item, or to respond to the mood of a class on a particular day. Bartlett and Butler (1985) as cited in Nunan (1988) assert that each language classroom can be looked on as a rather unique learning environment in which the teacher needs to feel free to insert the required adjustments and modifications in the designed syllabus and the curriculum with respect to goal, objective, the learners and teachers' variables, and other situational factors in order to pave the ground for leading the learners towards fulfilling their needs and expectations as they often find necessary to add a new element to materials at hand. They also refer to the type curriculum in which teacher's adjustments are permissible as *the negotiated curriculum*. The negotiated curriculum refers to those curriculum activities which involve negotiation and consultation between teachers and students. It includes such processes as needs analysis, jointly conducted goal and objective, exercises set by teachers and learners, selection of preferred methodology through negotiation, materials and learning activities, and the sharing of evaluation and self-evaluation procedures. The teacher should not hesitate to make the necessary decisions if they seem appropriate. Decisions like selecting a whole course, omitting certain exercises, and adapting a communicative activity all lie with the teacher. The learners would benefit from teachers adjustments if teachers feel free to make them where they feel necessary. On receiving feedback from students, it is ultimately the teacher who makes decisions. These decisions may be macro decisions, such as deciding which course to use or planning a year's work, or they might be micro decisions which are taken quickly as a lesson progress, such as deciding to do an extra exercise on a grammar topic or postponing a listening activity until a later lesson Cunningsworth, 1998). Widdowson (1984) focuses on needs of the learners in this regard. He expresses that there may be a case for concentrating on the learners' needs in the first sense in order to delimit initially the language to be included in a course; but needs of the second kind-learning needs- will have to be taken into account in the

methodological implementation of course proposals. Crombie (1988) seriously questions the validity and usefulness of many available textbooks that aim at teaching English to enthusiastic language learners worldwide. He ponders upon the issue by raising a question that he himself bids to answer it, why has there been such a proliferation of language materials in the market?

Tomlinson (1998) asserts that there are four components which can be considered as the main components of which deserve discussing. The first one is the impact of the materials on the needs and curiosity of the learners and type of effects that arouse attention and interests of learners. Certainly, to attain these goals in the classroom, they must fully aware of their own learners so as to adapt material which is appropriate, fruitful and focused on the needs of the learners. The Second one, the teachers should include authentic material which takes place in the real life for the learners. The materials should also arose the learners interaction and engagement with input. (Tomlinson, 1998). The third characteristics which have got paramount importance, materials should engage all learners with different learning styles and intelligences. If teachers know their students, they will design activities in which students can really feel at ease using their learning preferences and abilities Rubdy (2003) also maintains that given the complexity of the whole language learning process, even with the best intentions no single textbook can possibly work in all situations. Saraceni (2003) also believes that published materials present a kind of paradox: in the majority of cases they become rather superficial and non-participatory because the writers of such materials tend to cater for all the needs and learning styles of language learners. Learners of language should have a feeling that the whole language is not grammatical points, words and their use, however, a dynamics that they can have their own likes and dislikes making learning language joyful and enjoyable.. Finally, materials adaptation is the guidance towards students' autonomy and independence.

Graves (2000) explains that designing a language course has several components. She continues that classical models of curriculum design as well as more recent models agree on most of the components although they may subdivide some of them and give them slightly different names. McDonough and Shaw (1993) list the following as some of the reasons for adopting materials: 1) not enough coverage of the intended skills, 2) not enough practice of the intended skills, 3) text difficulty, 4) lack of authenticity of materials, 5) inappropriate subject matter, 6) culturally inappropriate materials, 7) not enough match between the course time and the amount of materials to be covered, 8) lack of communicative tasks. Islam and Mares (2003) also add the following to McDonough and Shaw's list. The authors include such factors as: 1) methods of presenting materials, 2) the language of presented materials, 3) subject matter of the presented materials, 4) making a balance between the skills in the presentation of materials, 5) progression and gradation of the selected materials, 6) cultural content of the selected materials, 7) artistic aspects of the selected materials. McDonough and Shaw (1993) provide a list of objectives that a teacher may hope to achieve by adapting classroom materials. They state that in order to attain greater appropriacy from materials, the teachers can adapt to personalize, individualize, and localize. In order to personalizing the materials, the teacher should try to increase the relevance of content in relation to learners' interests and needs. Individualization of the materials addresses learner differences, including the learners' learning and cognitive styles. Localization, as it is described by McDonough and Shaw "takes into account the international geography of English language teaching and recognition that what may work in one place may not do so in another location" (p. 78).

These components, according to Graves (2000), comprise setting objectives based on some form of assessment; determining content, materials, and method; and evaluation. She developed a chart as the framework of course development and she hoped to capture two aspects of course design. The first aspect is that there is no hierarchy in the processes and no sequence in their accomplishment. As a course designer you can begin anywhere in the frame work, as long as it makes sense to you to begin where you do. She expresses that deciding where to begin will depend on how you problematize your situation, that is, how to determine the challenges that you can most productively address within the context. Graves (2000) argues that when you design a course, examining, framing, and attempting to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice become examining, framing, and attempting to address the challenges of course design.

It is interesting to note that how the two kinds of need were related in the design of structural syllabuses of the conventional kind. He continues that needs analysis for ESP has generally been concerned with the specification of aims in this sense, and methodological modification has not been very much in evidence. This is not to say that the importance of such modification has not been recognized. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) express that objectives pay attention to more general, ordinary, social and institutional needs address more general, societal, community, or institutional concerns. They should consider language policy and planning and the role of foreign /second language in the society and issues being main concern of the learners, society and institutional needs .They determine the goals to be manifested in the course.

According to Nunan (1988), syllabus design is essentially concerned with the selection and grading of content. It formed a sub-component of the planning phase of curriculum development. He continues that the first question to confront the syllabus designer is where the content is to come from in the first place. (p.37). When the selecting of materials are considered as much of importance, in this regards the needs of the learners should be paid attended, so what is need analysis?

Needs analysis is defined by Nunan (1988) as an information gathering process when he referred to needs analysis as "techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design" (p. 13) Moreover, in Richards & Platt, (1992, p. 242) needs analysis is defined as "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of

learners require a language and arranging the needs according to priorities". Hutchinson & Waters (1997) defined needs analysis by distinguishing between target needs, i.e. what the learner needs to do in order to learn, and 'wants' which represent the learners' views regarding what their needs are. Target needs; according to the authors include 'necessities' which refer to what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. While, 'lacks' which refer to need to know what the learner knows already in order to decide which of the necessities the learner actually 'lacks' (pp. 54-56). Wilkins described the synthetic approach in the following terms:

A synthetic language teaching strategy is one in which the different parts of language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up.(Wilkins, p.2). As Maftoon (2001) states it is improbable to be involved in communicative syllabus design without recognizing and analyzing the language needs of the learners. He mentions that "the reason is that if language is a system for expressing meanings and if language learners have different communicative purposes, then these communicative purposes are surely to be reflected in the materials the learners should be taught and to be materialized in the activities they will later engaged in target situations. Therefore the first step in the construction of a language syllabus is to define objectives based upon an analysis of the needs of the learners. Mackay (1965) lists the final criterion for selection and grading as learnability. He gives five factors which are taken into account when considering the learability of a word:

a. similarity of the L2 words to its L1 equivalent make them easy to learn
b. concrete words are easier than abstract ones to learn
c. long words are more difficult
d. regularity seen in the words make them easy to learn
e. some components of the words are already known which make learning those words easy

Clark (1987) also explains that an analysis of the content of a particular subject into its constituent elements of knowledge determines what is to be taught and learnt. This is then sequenced in what is deemed to be a logical way from the simple to be the more complex.

Content selection is an important component of a learner-centered curriculum. In such a curriculum clear criteria for content selection give guidance on the selection of materials and learning activities and assist in assessment and evaluation. The answer in part is that they are easy to write and they only have face validity: they look good. They look good precisely because their authors have been released into seemingly limitless freedom. This freedom result from the fact that they are free to put almost anything anywhere. Part of the problem here is that publishers have responded almost too well. They have excelled themselves in terms of layout, artwork and graphics. Indeed I believe that the success of many courses is almost entirely attributed to the production teams in publishing houses (Crombie, 1988, p.290).

Crombie is not the only critic of existing materials; other researchers have also attended to various problems with materials. For instance, McDonough and Shaw (1993) propose that no matter how internally coherent the textbooks are, they may not be suitable for the context of use.

Masuhara (1998) contends that any given course book will be incapable of catering for the diversity of needs which exists in most language classrooms. Due to the fact that publishers opt for global markets to sell their products, specific needs of learners become of secondary importance (Maley, 1998).

There is no end to the list of the shortcomings; however, the key point remains: teachers, with direct personal knowledge of their classroom teaching, should regard textbooks as their servants and not masters (Littlejohn, 1998). Materials adaptation allows language teachers to achieve more compatibility and fitness between the textbook and the teaching environment, it, therefore; maximizes the value of the book for the intended learners, this would in turn lead to reconciling materials as 'constraint' with materials as 'empowerment' (Maley, 1998, p. 279).

Island and Mares (2003) extend this list of objectives to include:1) real choice, 2) learner autonomy, 3) higher level cognitive accessibility, 4) accessibility of language input, and 5) more engaging language input.

For a teacher who wants to adapt materials a number of options are available. Maley (1998) enlists these options as: 1) Omission, 2) addition, 3) reduction, 4) extension, 5) rewriting and modification, 6) replacement, 7) reordering, and 8) branching. Islam and Mars also introduce such steps as: 1) adding, that includes extending and expanding, 2) deleting, that includes such steps as subtracting and abridging, 3) simplifying, 4) reordering, and 5) replacing. In one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the process of materials adaptation, McDonough and Shaw (1993) recount the adaptation techniques as following: 1) adding, 2) deleting, 3) modifying, 4) simplifying, and finally 5) reordering. The notion of addition implies that materials are supplemented by putting more into them, while considering the practical effect on time allocation. Addition process according to these authors can include both extension and expanding. During the extension process, language teacher "supplies more of the same materials" (p.79), in other words, the teacher does not modify methodology or language teaching model in order to attain the desired objectives. Expanding is distinct from extension in that the language teacher changes the methodology. Deletion is the opposite process to that of addition. This technique includes such activities as subtraction and abridgement. Subtraction is quantitative reduction of the content without any methodological change in the content. Abridgement, on the contrary, influences the methodology as well as the content. Modification includes such steps as rewriting and restructuring. Rewriting is utilized when the content of the materials needs modification, restructuring, on the other hand, applies to classroom management.

Simplification is another technique that language teachers can utilize for the purpose of adapting language materials. As McDonough and Shaw put it simplification is can be regarded as one aspect of modification or 'rewriting' to be exact. Since simplification has received considerable attention in its own right, the writers assign a separate category to this technique. Many parts of course material can be simplified, this includes such aspects as: 1) sentence structure, 2) lexical content, 3) grammatical structures as well as instructions and explanations that accompany exercises and activities. Widdowson (1979) extensively discusses the process of simplification and draws our attention to some of the problem that simplification may cause. These include stylistic change in meaning that will lead to the text's incompressibility. Last but by no means least, McDonough and Shaw refer to reordering process that "refers to the possibility of putting the parts of a textbook in a different order" (p. 83). This may mean the adjustment of presentation sequence within a unit or taking units in a different sequence from that originally intended.

Richards (2001) explains that in developing goals for educational programs, curriculum planners draw on their understanding both of the present and long-term needs of learners and of society as well as the planners' beliefs and ideologies about schools, learners, and teachers. He emphasizes that the justification for the aims of curriculum stresses the intrinsic value of the subject matter and its role in developing the learners' intellect, humanistic values, and rationality. Richards (2001) mentions that in curriculum discussions the terms 'goal' and 'aim' are used interchangeably to refer to a description of the general purposes of a curriculum and objective to refer to a more specific and concrete description of purposes. An aim refers to a statement of a general change that a program seeks to bring about in learners. According to Richards (2001), the purposes of aim statements are: To provide a clear definitions of the purposes of a program, To provide guidelines for teachers, learners, and materials writers, To help provide a focus for instruction, To describe important and realize changes in learning.

Richards (2001) believes that aims statements reflect the ideology of the curriculum and show how the curriculum will seek to realize it. He continues that an 'objective' refers to a statement of specific changes a program seeks to bring about and results from an analysis of the aim into its different components. Objectives, for Richards, have the following characteristics: They describe what the aim seeks to achieve in terms of smaller units of learning. They provide a basis for the organization of teaching activities. They describe learning in terms of observable behavior or performance.

He continues that the advantages of describing the aims of a course in terms of objectives are: They facilitate planning: Once objectives have been agreed on, course planning, materials preparation, textbook select ion, and related processes can begin. They provide measurable outcomes and thus provide accountability: Given a set of objectives, the success or failure of a program to teach the objectives can be measured. They are perspective: They describe how planning should proceed and do away with subjective interpretations and personal opinions.

Richards (2001) emphasizes that objectives should be consistent with the curriculum aim. Nunan (1988) also explains that goal statements are relatively imprecise. While they can act as general signposts, they need to be fleshed out in order to provide information for course and program planners. This can be achieved through the specification of objectives.

Nunan (1988 a) points out that objectives are really nothing more than a particular way of formulating or stating content and activities. Thus how one conceptualizes and states objectives depends on how one conceptualizes the content of the course.

Munby (1978, p.217)) mentions it as a constraint on the implementation of the aim specification derived from operational instrument: These implementational constraints are, of course, significant in the modification of syllabus specifications and production of materials, but that is the next stage in course design and should not take place until after the output from the operational instrument has been obtained." (Munby, 1978, p. 217)

Taba's steps which a course designer must work through to develop subject matter courses and these steps have become the foundations for many other writers' suggestions are outlined by Dubin and Olshtain (1986). These steps are: needs and wants distinction, recognizing of purposes, providing content materials, learning activities, and what should be assesses and tested.

Stern (1992 cited in Graves 1996) proposes four types of goals for language learners: Proficiency goals, cognitive goals, affective goals, and transfer goals. In an ideal situation, thus, goals are determined by carefully examining information about the patterns of language use within the various domains of the society, as well as by studying group and individual attitudes towards English and toward all other languages which are used in the setting. Objectives, in turn, are specific outcomes or products of courses which are outlined in a syllabus. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) agreed that the aims lead teachers and assist learners to understand what is going on the course and what the reason is. Course designers ideally make use of information from all interested sources when they write objectives. In some countries, according to Dubin and Olshtain (1986), general goals of a language program might be defined more narrowly if the system has different types of schools, for example: Academic high schools, scientific high schools, vocational high schools. On the basis of broader goals, it is necessary to set up a number of intermediate objectives in an attempt to specify expected outcomes at each stage.

Clear goals and objectives give the teacher a basis for determining which content and activities are appropriate for her course. They also provide a framework for evaluation of the effectiveness or worth of an activity. Widdowson (2003) believes that the purpose of the course is to give momentum and direction, to establish vectors, so to speak, for subsequent learning, and thus to provide bearings whereby learners can make sense and learn from their own linguistic

experience. It is worth mentioning to refer to Graves (1996) who believes that to arrive at the goals, one asks the question, "What are the purposes and intended outcomes of the course?" The answer may be influenced by an analysis of students' needs, the policies of the institution, and the way the teacher conceptualizes content, among other factors.

Breen (1989) expresses that in discovering what learners themselves regard as the most valuable purposes for a task or tasks, the classroom group is necessarily involved in the specification of their needs in learning. He argues that a general approach would require the learners to identify as clearly as possible individual and group goals for language learning. Learner goals may be initially vague and certainly change over time and become more refined and realistic.

Stern (1989) argues that it is necessary that language teaching always pursue all the objectives and content areas simultaneously. The criterion statement one might suggest is that a language policy is better to the extent that it identifies as clearly as possible both its objectives and the content of teaching, and justifies its priorities on rational grounds, that is, why it emphasizes one or the other content area or this or that objective to a greater or lesser extent.

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