An Evaluation of the Various Syllabus Types
in Relation to Teaching First Year
Junior College Students

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Introduction

The following deals with the theory behind and the problems associated with selecting an appropriate syllabus for Japanese Junior College First Year Students, after which it goes on to deal with the process of making suitable adjustments in the light of the teaching situation.

I will discuss the term "syllabus" in order to clarify what is to follow; so for the purposes of this assignment, make a distinction between syllabus and curriculm and between syllabus and methodology. There are certain factors to consider when selecting a syllabus for any specific group, so pedagogical and learner factors are taken into account in the analysis of student needs.

Also to be considered are the merits and defects of the various syllabus types that may be under consideration, and the studies made into language acquisition theory. These studies into what makes an effective learner naturally has a bearing on selection of a syllabus type. Having considered these, a discussion can then take place regarding which syllabus type might be most appropriate.

Definition of Syllabus

It is important to at first define the terms that will be used. For these purposes, the concept of syllabus will be treated as being distinct from that of curriculum. Nunan described Candlin's view of curricula being general statements regarding such elements as "learning purpose" and "role relationships", syllabuses being more concerned with "what actually happens at the classroom level". (Nunan 1988 : 3). Allen talks of syllabus being a "sub-part of a curriculum" (in Ibid p6). Nunan himself makes the distinction as follows:

> Curriculum is concerned with the planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programmes. Syllabus, on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content." (Ibid p8)

There will of course be implications on the curriculum due to decisions made regarding

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the syllabus, the point here being the distinction between the two terms. A further distinction that needs to be made is between that of syllabus and methodology. For these purposes the terms will be treated as having distinct boundaries between each other, i. e., syllabus being:

> how the language is organized and what skills ... we concentrate on (Harmer 1991 : 25),

the concern of methodology being how language is brought about. There are times however when these boundaries may become blurred, for example when considering "process syllabuses".

John Skelton in "Course and Syllabus Design-An Overview" stated that a syllabus might be simply a contents page from a course book, so the teacher's role as a syllabus designer is limited to more of a selector, though it leaves him or her with a considerable amount of options regarding selection and organization of content and the opportunity to use supplementary materials. From this position I will go on to examine the learner and situational factors, and principles behind the selection of a syllabus.

Learner and situational factors to be considered when analysing students' needs.

(a) Purpose

The students have learned English for about six years, yet as is common with most Japanese students with this experience, their level is acknowledged to be at that of a beginner or "false beginner" as it is known. Of the students themselves, most of them do not expect to use their English in an occupation they might find after graduation. With regard to travelling abroad, most of them have never been abroad, but some of them will have the opportunity to travel either to an English speaking country with the college between their first and second year. Huchinson and Waters stated that the difference between general English and E.S.P. was "in theory nothing but in practice a great deal" (1987 : 53), meaning that there are always needs but the awareness of them is the important distinguishing factor. It is for this reason that this work relates to General Purpose English, the aim being in Widdowson's words :

> fulfils an educative function and is aimed at development of general capacity (Nunan 1988 : 24)

(b) Age

The age of the group is relevant when preparing a syllabus. It is acknowledged that adults learn faster compared to children so a syllabus for the above client group should reflect this. Adult learners' first language is firmly established so the age factor is also relevant in a psychological sense; adult learners may want to resist acquiring a second

culture which many writers regard as being important if the learning process is to be effective. Preston quoting Gardner and Lambert's view that successful students :

> must be both able willing to adopt various aspects of behaviour which characterise members of the linguistic-cultural group (quoted in Preston 1979 : 79)

This view however is not shared by all. Alpetkin mentions that such assumptions may be "distasteful" to the students (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991) and infact there is evidence to support the view that "instrumental motivation" can be equally as productive as "intergrative motivation". Bearing in mind what has been said so far about students' future use of English, one might expect instrumental motivation to be low. With regard to intergrative motivation, although many students display very positive attitudes, it is quite an assumption to ascribe intergrative motivation to a group of students at the planning stage of a syllabus.

(c) Attitude

Larsen-Freeman and Long speak of motivation and of attitude. Again evidence is contradictory, although it is noted that success in learning does produce "positive attitudes to the target language group" (1992 : 177). An attitudinal factor which might affect a syllabus planner is the consideration of the learning situation; LFL note Schumann and Schumann's point that negative attitudes develop if "the learner's agenda is different from the teacher" (1992 : 178). For example in the situation where a teacher puts too much emphasis on culture as mentioned above or the teacher's methods deviate too much from what the student might expect. The syllabus planner therefore needs to be sensitive to any attitude that the syllabus is likely to generate.

(d) Aptitude

Aptitude is another factor to be considered. Neufield noted that second language ability was "dependent on prior learning experiences" (in Ibid 1992 : 207). If this is the case, then the students' performance so far, would tell the syllabus planner something about the goals he might wish to set, ie they should not be too ambitious.

(e) Personality

Personality is also a variable to be considered. Evidence suggests that shy children are more suited to structured teacher controlled activities (Ibid 1992 : 209), and that those with conformist personality traits responded less positively to immersion programmes. (Hamayan, Genesee and Tucker in Ibid 1992 : 210). If it were possible to make generalizations about a particular group of students from the same country, one might be tempted to say that Japanese tend to be shy, particularly young Japanese women. Japanese with their traditional respect for authority, also tend to be more conformist than their European counterparts. An assessment of what kind of approach need be adopted

should therefore receive careful attention.

Generalizations are always difficult to make, particularly when talking about a culturally homogeneous group of students. However, experience with this client group has provided many examples of what is referred to as "field dependence". Evidence suggests that learners learn quicker when teaching matches students' cognitive style, though some writers, Ried and Schmeck believe students ability will be increased if exposed to a variety of cognitive styles. Larsen-Freeman and Long do note however that developing new learner strategies and styles may take "considerable time" (1992 : 213) and make a point relevant to this teaching situation by quoting O'Malley :

Asian experimental subjects were more reluctant...to relinquish rote memorization techniques (Quoted in Ibid 1992 : 213)

The point for the syllabus planner is to be aware, in Tumpolsky's words :

materials lacking...flexibility may contribute to poor performance (Ibid 1992 : 212)

A discussion of the appropriacy of different syllabus types for First Year College students against the background of S. L. A. studies.

Having described the teaching situation and the nature of the learners, this establishes the context in which it is hoped, language acquisition takes place. Informed decisions regarding the planning of a syllabus may take into account the studies which have been made into language acquisition in order to achieve results. However, studies that have been carried out still leave many questions unanswered and the findings may be interpreted by the various parties as supportive of their particular stance. This section examines how language acquisition studies might help a syllabus planner for the above group and secondly, what attractions there may be to the "product" and "process" syllabuses.

The work of Stephen Krashen has been undeniably significant. His research supported the view that instructed language learning was in fact counterproductive because language could only be "acquired" in a natural learning situation. However, more recent studies have challenged and provided evidence to support theories directly contrary to those espoused by Krashen. Studies carried out by Pienemann, and Pica have come to similar conclusions. Ellis summarizes recent findings :

Grammar instruction results in faster learning. . . , directed at a grammatical feature that learners are not ready to acquire . . . does not succeed , . . . directed at a grammatical feature that learners are ready to acquire . . . is successful. (Ellis 1993 : 97).

These conclusions would indicate to a syllabus planner that formal instruction can play a valuable role in the classroom. They also may be seen as leaning toward those who pre-

fer to emphasize more "product" orientated syllabuses.

Second Language Acquisition studies are by no means partisan. Studies have also shown that grammatical structures are acquired in a particular order, yet this has led some to advocate a syllabus following this order, and others to advocate a "process" based syllabus where emphasis is placed on meaning and the structures therefore will take care of themselves.

Many syllabus designers and teachers still tend to adhere to "product" based sylla-buses particularly those which emphasize grammar. This position has its supporters, Widdowson for example supports a flexible syllabus based around structure. Indeed, Ellis in his criticism of Krashen cited the work of Faerch who assessed Krashen's view as being:

> contrary to the successful experiences of many teachers, who have used traditional grammar teaching methods. (Ellis 1987 : 193).

Such methods have been criticized however, because they may be seen as providing the student with inauthentic language, and they are also seen as being unrealistic:

> research has demonstrated that learners rarely if ever move from zero to target-like mastery of new items in one step (Long and Crookes 1992 : 30)

A radical alternative could be a process orientated syllabus. Prabhu in his "Bangalore Project" introduced tasks for his students to carry out, with emphasis placed on meaning. His ideas are vulnerable to criticism in that the grading of the tasks was far from a clear process and perhaps most importantly, the task based syllabus made little reference to learner needs.

Crookes and Long in the field of course design produced what they call "Task Based Language Teaching" in which:

> tasks provide the vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples (1992 : 43)

Such a syllabus would it is claimed include a needs analysis, a classification of the tasks according to student need, and a sequencing of the tasks according to difficulty. The ideas are apparently still in their infancy and though interesting, are at present unsuit-able to be considered as the central focus of the syllabus for First Year College Students. This is partly due to practical difficulties i.e. there is no text that appears to offer a programme such as this. There is also the issue of general unsuitability to consider. If a needs analysis is to take place before a decision is to be taken regarding the type of syl-labus to be assigned, it must naturally take account of the teaching environment and such things as learner expectations and experience as well as their learning style. Process

type syllabuses involve a high degree of learner independence, and such a syllabus would be going against the nature of the Japanese learner. Such a radical departure from their previous educational experience would be a shock for most whose learning styles are characterized by field dependency. This however does not preclude the use of tasks as a complementary supplement to the syllabus.

Rod Ellis, saw the role of a structural syllabus as being a "substantial one" (1993 : 91). He sees it as important in improving what he calls "explicit knowledge" (analysed knowledge) and can be in Terrell's words, an "advance organizer" (1991 : 98). This appeals to the Japanese learner who feels much more comfortable knowing what the end product will look like beforehand. Ellis sees the role of structural syllabus as being useful for "consciousness-raising" and thinks that explicit knowledge is more likely to become "implicit" (formulaic, internalized knowledge) if structural syllabuses are complemented by elements from other syllabus types, specifically task.

In his article "Contextual Variability" Ellis spoke of such syllabuses ; "spiral" and "parallel" syllabuses and of the issues involved in preparing one :

> the principle decision will be to decide what proportions of teaching time to allocate to the product and process strands. (1987 · 188)

This decision will depend on a variety of factors relating to the teaching situation and the students.

The selection of an appropriate syllabus: reasons and possible improvements in accordance with student needs.

Having discussed the factors relevant to planning a syllabus ; learner factors, situational factors, studies made into language acquisition, and the various options regarding syllabus types, the syllabus planner is equipped to make a suitable decision as to what kind of syllabus to assign to the group. Swan made the point that :

> The real issue is not which syllabus to put first. It is how to integrate ... into a sensible teaching programme. (quoted in Robinson 1991 : 41)

Indeed, a syllabus designed or selected can never be a perfect fit to the learners' needs. In fact Huchinson and Waters say there are "only degrees of fitness" and in and in any case, choices are always made on "subjective grounds" (1987 : 96/97). When evaluating a syllabus the criteria to do so will be that of measuring the fit between what is in the syllabus ("objective analysis" according to Huchinson and Waters Op Cit p100) and what should be in the syllabus ie giving a better reflection of students' needs. Some parts of the syllabus may be unnecessary or take up disproportionate amounts of time, thus detracting from the purposes of the course. For example, the students have been through six years of English study and need very little reminding of vocabulary items such as job

titles or days of the week, their primary shortcoming is not being able to construct sentences. Therefore, these parts of the syllabus should be given the appropriate attention in favour of instruction how to construct sentences and plenty of practice doing so.

In terms of skill intergration, both the purposes of the course and the needs of the students require a more heavy weighting in favour of speaking. Japanese students have had a lot of emphasis placed on reading and writing so despite their inclusion in the course book they may be adapted into a suitable speaking activity. Such decisions are consistant with the aims of an English conversation course and with the needs of these particular students.

An important element that needs to be mentioned is that of conversational management. Students need, and the syllabus should include a lot of practice in the management of turn-taking, the role of topics and how to open and close conversations. Richards considers teaching conversational strategies as a central focus in what he calls a "direct approach" to teaching conversation. (1990 : 79).

The balance between structure and task at first needs to be weighted in favour of the former. However, as the course progresses and students feel more confident with the language and have control of a number of structures already, students may feel more comfortable with increased use of tasks, but nevertheless against a background of an intergrated structure focused syllabus. It would be demoralizng and demotivating for First Year students to be introduced to a task or a cognitive style for which they were not ready. They need to be guided more in the initial stages, and a suitable syllabus needs to provide such a guide.

Conclusion

It is likely that the task based syllabus will become more popular, and it is probable that more task based English language textbooks may soon be made available. This can only bring good ideas to language teachers and of course fuel the academic debate over which type of syllabus best promotes second language acquisition. However, despite the studies that have been made into the area, evidence has yet to prove that one syllabus type is clearly better than another.

It is the teacher's task to become acquainted with the local situation and plan a suitable syllabus based on the needs of the students. A syllabus however should not be rigid. The teacher should be able to take account of the progress of his or her students and be able to adapt the course in a way that reflects this. Yet it is from the base of an integrated structure focused syllabus, which I regard for First Year students as the most suitable base from which to make such adjustments.

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