

*The English Teacher* Vol XXV October 1996

## **CREATIVELY ADAPTING SYLLABI To MATCH LEARNERS' NEEDS AND INTERESTS\***

\*This paper was presented at MELTA'S Biennial International Conference on 'Innovations in Approaches to the Teaching and Learning of English' held in Kuala Lumpur in May 1995.

**Jacqueline McCracken**  
*Universiti Pertanian Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper looks at how syllabi are used and how they should be designed and adapted for individual learning situations to meet specific learners' needs and interests.

As we look to the present and future needs for English Language Education, not in Malaysia only but also around the world, we face the challenge of organizing our English education scheme to fit within the constraints of theoretical approaches of language teaching, the prescribed system's curriculum and syllabus, and the needs and interests of the students within the classroom. It should be our goal whether language planners within ministries of various countries, state curriculum planners, or the practitioners providing the actual instruction in the school to always be thinking through what we are doing, why we are doing it and evaluating whether it is effective at this point in time with the present recipients of our instruction.

In this paper I will present the challenge of looking at how syllabi are used and how they maybe should be designed and adapted for individual learning situations to meet specific learners' needs and interests. You may respond with "Evaluating and creatively adapting syllabi" Why? That's not my job. What's wrong with the status quo?"

Let me insert a quote from a Malaysian newspaper article published on December 14, 1995 from THE STAR "Move to make Geography interesting. BANGI: The education Ministry is looking into ways to make Geography a more interesting and popular subject among students ... "If it means having to restructure the syllabus, then we will do so." True, this is from another discipline, but couldn't we insert English in place of *Geography* and have a valid goal? My contention is that teachers within the classroom themselves can and should plan their own term syllabus using, adapting, and still meeting the syllabus requirements imposed by the national or state education board or ministry.

Encouraging teachers to come up with creative ideas to adapt the present school syllabus may be risky. You say "I may risk offending, scaring and even threatening others or those over me in authority - who needs that?" Why be creative? Robert Sternberg and Todd Lubart, professors at Yale University say in their newly published book, *Defying the Crowd, Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*. "How much more creativity might we see in the world if only those who should support creativity really did - if they truly wanted to hear it?"

This past semester I have been teaching one hundred and fifteen TESL students at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in a course entitled, "A Survey of the Trends and Approaches in English Language Teaching in Relation to Syllabus Types in TESL." Though this could have been a very theoretical, historical based class, my approach has always been to tie theory or history to the present situation, and to provide practical applications. Hence after surveying the various language teaching approaches (structural, notional-functional, situational and communicative, along with seeing the trends of test-, teacher-, learner- and the current learning-oriented emphases) the students were each required to do a syllabus design project. We accepted these propositions before carrying out the project.

1. There is no universal perfect model,
2. Various combinations are possible with various focuses.
3. Classroom experiences which more closely approximate real language use are communicative in nature.
4. The goals of the program are major determinants of syllabus type.
5. Questions to consider are:
  - A. What type of content to include/exclude
  - B. Whether to combine various syllabus types or rely on a single type
  - C. If more than one type will be included, will one type be basic, will the types follow a sequence, or will they be coexisting in various proportions?
6. Because teachers tend to teach what they know, they must be willing to risk something new, not settle with what is the comfortable.
7. Narrowly defined syllabi allow little room for modification.
8. More loosely defined syllabi allow for flexibility, modification and innovation.

## Viewing the Situation

Let me review the concepts and stages that relate to the terms, "curriculum" and "syllabus." As outlined by Johnson (1989), we can see the various developmental stages, decision-making roles, and products are depicted as follows:

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES	DECISION-MAKING ROLES	PRODUCTS
1. Curriculum planning	Policy makers	Policy document
2. Specification Ends, Means	Needs analyst Methodologists	Syllabus
3. Program	Materials writers	Teaching materials

implementation	Teacher trainers	Teacher-training program
4. Classroom implementation	Teacher Learner	Teaching acts Learning acts

I am proposing that perhaps these delineations, though necessary in program planning, have caused mis-matches in the classroom and the need arises to encourage creative freedom among the practitioners in the classroom. The classroom teacher should analyze and create appropriate matches of the syllabus for his or her classroom profile.

In his paper *"TESOL at Twenty-Five: What are the Issues?"* (1991), Brown delineated the direction of English language classes in the 1990s.

<i>We are moving from:</i>	<i>and shifting toward:</i>
a focus only on product	a focus on process
authoritarian structures	egalitarian structures
preplanned, rigid curricula	flexible, open-ended curricula
measuring only performance	gauging competence and potential
praising only "correct" answers	encouraging calculated guessing
championing analysis	valuing synthesis and intuition

Today, we are considering the move from "authoritarian structures" and "preplanned, rigid curricula." There are a myriad of issues involved in the language teaching/learning discipline. It is almost an impossibility to isolate and concentrate on one aspect.

Let's verify that we have a common understanding of what I'm calling a syllabus. This terminology in today's presentation refers to the content of a certain course for a specific level and school term. Curriculum includes many syllabi, not vice versa. The syllabus for a specific course (or class) will be the guide, the route, which will determine what gets taught and in what order. We must at the same time recognize what Brown (1980) said, "We should have full awareness that communication in a foreign language is something so complex that it will probably never be reduced to a simple formula or a neatly packaged syllabus. Communication is qualitative and infinite, a syllabus is quantitative and finite." But we are looking at a design, a way to take through a course.

Now let's refer again to the assignment given my students to design a syllabus as a culmination project to synthesize the learning for the semester in a practical way. Each student was challenged to come up with a hypothetical class profile, consider what would constitute a needs analysts for that class and then think through what type of syllabus would be appropriate for the needs and interests of his or her particular class. Some students directed their planning towards specialized classes such as adult business people needing English oracy skills, hotel receptionists, Malaysian Armed Forces working with NATO, and tourist guides to name a few, while others chose to design their syllabi to be used in the Malaysian school system whether in a specific Standard (elementary) classroom or for

a Form (secondary) class. Let me share with you some of the feedback from these 115 TESL university students of whom about fifty-five were ex-teachers, with anywhere from five to twenty years of teaching experience, returning to get their degrees.

"I felt that giving us an assignment on 'Designing a Syllabus' was an eye-opener for us teachers who have been just following the existing syllabus in schools without giving much thought to the needs of our students. It has given me a better insight on the importance of catering to the needs of my future students."

"In designing the syllabus which you asked us to do I find that it gives me a 'whole new life' in teaching my students. When I think the syllabus that was designed couldn't fit my students' needs, I can design (adapt) my own syllabus that could fit their needs."

"A new understanding and concept for me was creating a syllabus that really suits our students. I need not rely so much on the syllabus specification designed but our main objectives are to meet our students' needs."

## Meeting Student Needs

Note a recurring theme in their comments to meet to fit, to suit our students' need. Why should this be such a revolutionary idea? Finocchiaro (1983) has said. "A well-designed curriculum will start with an attempt to specify the needs of the learners." Haven't we as language teachers been educated with an emphasis on meeting the learners' needs? Are we afraid to apply our professional experience and knowledge to our situation? Or are we just too lax to take the time to think through the "what and how" of our teaching, do we just proceed methodically through a textbook choosing appropriate curriculum requirements to match the activity which someone else has already laid out to teach? We organize our lessons built from a prescribed syllabus with the objectives stated each day. SWBAT (Student Will Be Able To:), but have we taken a global look at what would be a route to follow to meet the students' needs and interest?

To quote David Nunan from the book, *Syllabus Design* (1988: 79), "In considering needs and goals, we should keep in mind that the teacher's syllabus [and might I add, the adopted curriculum] and the learner's syllabus or agenda might differ. One of the purposes of subjective needs analysis is to involve learners and teachers in exchanging information so that the agendas of the teacher and the learner may be more closely aligned." Nunan has always stated that there are at least three sources of mismatches between teaching and learning (1) learners may be unaware of the official curriculum, (2) the learners may have different priorities from the teacher, and (3) some of the course content may be unlearnable which is beyond the learner's current stage of development.

If we are honest, have the students' needs and reasons to learn English been taken into account in our planning, be it the daily lessons, the units of work or the term syllabus? Listen to a few more quotes from the TESL class members.

"For me, the whole idea of giving priority (importance) to needs analysis was new. Upon going through this, I realize that this is a must for teacher to do in order to succeed as teachers. It has been a tradition to just blindly follow the schema of work done by someone else, Teachers must be more professional."

"From our students' needs, we can design a syllabus suitable to their needs (which I did not know before this)"

"A new understanding for me - that a needs analysis is important before planning a syllabus. [You] can focus on one syllabus and incorporate the others and still teach all the different aspects of a language. There's no need to strictly follow what has been laid out in the textbooks -you can use the topics and themes and then incorporate your own ideas."

"I learned that there is no one particular approach, method or syllabus that is THE BEST. The teacher has to be sensitive to needs of the students and decide for himself/herself. I learned to always take into account learner needs. (I wish when I teach in a school, I'd be free to have my own syllabus.)"

If we are unaware of our individual learners' needs within our classroom how can we adequately claim to be teaching them? As Madeline Hunter stated twenty-five years back in *The Teacher's Handbook* (1971).

"An objective can be too difficult for and therefore unattainable by the learner no matter how hard he tries or how expertly the teacher teaches. The converse of this error is made when the learning objective is too easy or has already been achieved. With either erroneous decision, no learning will occur, in one case because it cannot, in the other case because it has already been accomplished."

I propose that this same claim can be made related to the plan, the syllabus, for a course which a teacher attempts to follow when it has been prepared without taking the specific learners involved into consideration.

## Directing the Focus

Do we really want to admit as these university-student returning teachers did, that our profession has supposedly recognized a focus on the learners and their needs, but the practitioners have not thought through how to creatively put this into practice? Do we not more often than we like to admit, use what has already been laid out for us in the approved textbook which incorporates the curriculum requirements and "rotely, robotically or unthinkingly" move through the weeks allotted for the term towards the end? Let me refer to an article taken from another Malaysian newspaper, *New Straits Times*, March 30, 1996, p.10 "GENTING HIGHLANDS, Fri. -

**'Teachers more keen on finishing syllabus'** - Primary school teachers who teach Bahasa Melayu are more concerned with finishing their syllabus on time than ensuring that their pupils understand the subject, a seminar was told yesterday. Mohd Lani Sobi, from the Education Ministry's Curriculum Advancement Centre, said "Teachers also fail to overcome the pupils' weaknesses after identifying them," he said.

When will we take a second look at ourselves and what we are doing in and for our classes? Do we analyse the class profile (the students and their characteristics), which we will be teaching this term? Will we rethink the needs and interests of the particular students who will be sitting under our direction? Where are we going with our particular target class this term, and why?

We are not throwing out the approved required syllabi which we should follow or prescribed textbooks just because we implement adaptations to meet our students' needs. I propose that we as professionals in the teaching profession can be creative and adapt and cover all that is required in an adopted curriculum through a class syllabus planned to match our students' needs. I trust that you may be able to say as a couple of the students' quotes did, "it gives me a 'whole new life' in teaching my students, this is an eye-opener, I never thought about this aspect before."

Widdowson, (1984) has explained, "...the syllabus is simply a framework within which activities can be carried out: a teaching device to facilitate learning. It only becomes a threat to pedagogy when it is regarded as absolute rules for determining what is to be learned rather than points of reference from which bearings can be taken." '

The students in my class did not stray from or ignore the concepts we espouse in language teaching and the specifications outlined by their country's prescribed curriculum specifications. They incorporated the curriculum specifications required for the year or level of English class which they were teaching. Within their personal adaptation of a term syllabus for their classes, they laid out a plan which included the topics and curriculum specifications (with syllabus reference numbers where applicable). But they created a term syllabus to meet the level of interest and need of the student profiles they had within their individual classes. It can be done.

Go on an excursion with me to visit some of the teaching situations I have facilitated in the past to illustrate and show the importance of creatively making adaptations to meet learners' interests and need in English language teaching. First of all, let's start with a group of Professors, Ministry of Education Specialists, Technical University Educators from Turkey who came to The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio for nine months of study in their specialty. Because of an inability to use English, they were first assigned to me to provide immersion English for one quarter (a three-month term). As I interviewed them, I found much variance in English proficiency, plus a wide range of interests and needs. My assignment had been to prepare them with academic English for attending lectures and writing papers. But these professionals had good reading and writing knowledge within their academic fields of expertise already and knew English grammar as well as I did. Their perceived needs were to develop their listening and speaking skills with the purpose of living in the English-immersion environment and being able to communicate orally. Another hidden agenda of theirs was to enhance their English vocabulary and usage which could help them pass English examinations taken upon returning to Turkey, in turn giving them job promotions and salary increases. The prescribed syllabus to give them academic assignments and grammar instruction was definitely off-target according to their desires and motivation. In time throughout the quarter, through a more global approach within a communicative classroom, material using academic, professional vocabulary was incorporated within the learning activities, but not overtly taught as the course route. Their communication skills in English progressed and both their objectives and the university's objectives were accommodated, but this took work to adapt the syllabus to match these Turkish learners' desires as well as accomplish the goals to interpret what was heard in university lectures.

Another contract assignment I was given was to teach a graduate student sponsored by the Asia Foundation based in San Francisco. My assignment was to prepare him from the lectures and course assignments in his major - Chinese history - as he was unable to comprehend the lecture classes. The plan was to put him through an individual tutorial course using prescribed adult ESL textbooks and to develop his listening competency. After a few lessons, I realized we were getting nowhere. Comprehension was not occurring. We were both frustrated. I had to rethink the route that would project him to the desired destination of studying Chinese history in the English language medium. Since this student was from an Islamic background. I found a common basis from which to start

building a historical vocabulary -Old Testament personalities from the Bible which I knew well and which were the same persons he was also familiar with in his context. I'll always remember the look of recognition and excitement on his face as we began building speaking and listening skills from a schemata with which he was already acquainted. From then on we began building historical time lines from our common point of reference and hence began inserting his Chinese history textbook requirements into our reference points. Lessons which matched his needs and interests occurred and began projecting him towards his goal.

As many Japanese families associated with Honda of America moved to Ohio, their pre-schoolers, elementary and high school students were thrust into American schools. If they were younger than Seventh Grade, they had not yet studied any English, but quickly gained the language ability. The real challenge was to motivate the Secondary students particularly. They were mainstreamed onto English content courses except for one to three hours of ESL pull-out classes. Generally, these high school students' goals were to return to Japan for their university years. Except for those who wanted a strong English background for their future, they had no intrinsic motivation for learning the language. This created a difficult situation for them, for their parents and for the classroom teachers. Can you identify with this situation? I have visited schools here in Malaysia where the teachers say their students see no reason to learn the English language, they can get jobs and exist quite well within their own mother-tongue. What are we as teachers to do? My solution, both with the Japanese students as well as with these Malaysian classrooms, was to create a learning environment that appealed to these young peoples' intrinsic motivations - using activities and assignments which they could relate to and were interested in as teenagers which 'just happened to be' approached through the English medium. These content activities not only covertly and innovatively built their English competencies, but also developed their learning strategies and self-esteem.

Here is a situation one of my teacher trainees faced. He was trying to follow the prescribed format of conducting the Class Reader Program with his students. He said to me, "We should cover three Class Readers with the students, but my students can't read English at this level. How am I going to study this book with them?" We sat down together and discussed the basics of teaching and learning - comprehensible input - and outlined a starting base, building vocabulary and relating aspects of the story to their background knowledge. I stressed that any activities with some relation to the story which added to their English could be considered learning. Though it might take a slow pace to present the class reader, learning could take place. Of course another possibility would be to choose a much lower grade level reader with which to start these students. In a similar situation, I observed a teacher reading aloud two chapters from the Class Reader. I watched the students and waited for some evidence of comprehension offered by them at the end of the reading. There was little or none. When I questioned the teacher at the end why two chapters were read to them, this was the reply. "They are unable to pronounce and read the story themselves. And furthermore, I needed to finish the story so we could start another one." WHY? Why is it not better to create a learning situation with a smaller amount of material covered than to meet the objectives of finishing a certain number of books?

Let me share one more school situation with you. I was asked to consult with an American school situated in another Southeast-Asia country. The school was regarded as having high standards for expatriate students. Many Asian expatriates, as well as local citizens who wanted their students to study in an English medium enrolled their children there. Officials and teachers were struggling with how to deal with the Asian students who were deficient in their English skills, particularly evidenced by the writing assignments in the English class. The questions directed to me centered around how to grade these students their sentence structure and grammar usage definitely did not match with the

expected criteria set for Tenth-Grade (Form Four) English achievement. Two examples were from assignments for writing Descriptive and Persuasive papers. The teacher shared that he was going to have to fail some of the Asian students. My response was, "Did the students write a descriptive paper? Did they write what you would call a persuasive paper?" "Well, yes. But they made so many grammatical errors." "Okay, what was your objective for this assignment? Was it to learn how to describe or persuade? If so, did the content show evidence of meeting these objectives? Was learning taking place? Why don't you consider establishing ESL standards, not native speaker standards, for the students who are not native speakers?" My main point of concern with this school's teachers and administrators was whether their fixed academic standards were taking precedence over teaching students and helping students progress.

## Realizing Our Role

What is education all about? Is it to facilitate learning? Is it to impart the teacher's knowledge in a one-way direction? Is it to complete a syllabus or textbook regardless of whether it increases the student's proficiency level or not?

What is our goal as second language teachers, as course designers and practitioners? Is it for students to learn English and use it like we seem to support through our move to communicative teaching practices? Or is it to show we are the experts and everyone else can 'fall through the cracks' if they can't match up to the prescribed amount, level and content of our designed language courses?

"Teacher experts" were described by John Whitehead in TESOL Matters, Dec '92, Jan '93 in his article entitled, "*Teacher Expert or Expert Teacher?*" Whitehead is the British Language Officer at the British Council in Bogota, Colombia. He characterizes the teacher expert as "an expert technician trained to develop skills for controlling and organizing language input so that learners would be carefully guided through the various stages required to learn the target language." Second language development research now shows us that language learning is not a linear kind of process. Today's language teaching focus is on subconscious, learner-oriented activities. Whitehead portrays the "expert teacher" as one who not only possesses the linguistic expertise required, but also can manage learning. Effective teachers should relate to their learners as individuals and be able to acquire the skills and knowledge of an educator rather than be just a specialized technician.

Yalden (1987) furthers the notion of educators needing a greater awareness of the learning process and applying their expertise as expert teachers, not just teacher experts. "Recognition of the enormous possible variation in learning styles has thus led to much more complex view of learner-centred instruction, one that includes choices in four areas objectives of learning, rate of learning, method (or style) of learning, and content of learning. A definition of this kind points to the necessity for much more teamwork among teachers, and a completely different approach to structuring the curriculum and the timetable, if a learner-centred perspective is considered desirable."

If we look at learning and teaching as an art, not with scientific paradigms, we need to view our role as teachers as creative artists, structuring, adjusting our curriculum and timetable with a learner-centered perspective. We can help guide the students through the learning process using our real-life background knowledge and experience to creatively adapt a route to match the learners' needs and interests. This is necessary if we are going to enable our students to accumulate and internalize enough usable second language to make them feel confident and competent of their second language ability in the real world of the upcoming 21st century. We need not abandon the old nor march goal-



less through our language classes, but let us exhibit enough freedom from our past to allow ourselves to be artists who can adapt and create an appropriate syllabus to move our learners from one successful language learning venture to their next successful one.

### **Envisioning a Difference**

To quote Sternberg and Lubart (1995) again. "Some people may have creative potential, but it remains latent unless they manifest it in some observable form, by using the creative resources available to them. What do we mean by creativity? We describe a product as creative when it is (a) novel and (b) appropriate. These two elements are necessary, [if it] doesn't fit the constraints, it's just bizarre (and irrelevant)." To apply this to our creatively adapting a syllabus to fit our students, it is novel since it will be a unique match for the unique class and it definitely will be appropriate if we are taking into account our students' needs and interests.

As the classroom teacher, you are certainly the best one to identify what is relevant for your individual class. In the same way, you should know the issues related to the various complexities and approaches of language teaching. If not, you should be involved in more in-service workshops to be in touch with the state-of-the-art in the language teaching field "In the world of ideas, similarly, one needs to know a fair amount about the field in which one hopes to be creative. To go beyond the contributions of the past, one needs to know what they are. Otherwise one risks re-inventing the wheel" (Sternberg and Lubart).

The challenge is to plan a specific course syllabus to match your learners' needs, followed by their interests. This can put new life into the classroom for both students and teachers. Don't be tied to a planned trajectory which goes "somewhere in time and space" but is irrelevant (bizarre) for creating effective learning, just to "finish the syllabus on time."

"Any intelligent and disinterested observer knows that there are many ways to learn languages and many ways to teach them, that some ways work with some students in some circumstances and fail with others.. .good language teachers are...open to new proposals, and flexible to the needs of their students and the changing goals of their course." (Spolsky, 1992).

Take the challenge - Strive to be an expert teacher - Plan a course syllabus to meet your students' needs and interests to ensure that learning takes place. In turn, you will enjoy your work as a creative teacher who will make a difference.

### **References**

Brown, H.D. 1980. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs. NJ: Prentice Hall.

Brown, H.D. 1991. TESOL at Twenty-Five: What are the Issues? *TESOL Quarterly*, 25 (2). 245-258.

- Finocchiaro, M. and C.J. Brumfit 1983. *The Functional-Notional Approach: From Theory to Practice*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, Madeline. 1971. *The Teacher's Handbook*. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Co.
- Johnson, Keith. 1989. *The Second Language Curriculum*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- New Straits Times* 1966. Teachers more keen on finishing syllabus. March 30, p.10.
- Nunan, David. 1988. *Syllabus Design*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Spolsky, Bernard, 1992. *Conditions for Second Language Learning*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Star*, The 1995. Move to make Geography interesting. December 14.
- Sternberg, Robert and Todd Lubart. 1995. *Defying the Crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*. New York. The Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Whitehead, John. 1993. Teacher expert or expert teacher? *TESOL Matters*, Dec. 1992, Jan. 1993, 8.
- Widdowson, H.G. 1984. Educational and pedagogic factors in syllabus design, In C.J. Brumfit (ed) 1984, p. 26.
- Yalden, Janice. 1987. *Principles of Course Design for Language Teaching*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.