



## Discussing the Concepts of Curriculum, Syllabus, Curriculum Development and Syllabus Design

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### Abstract

Researchers do not always agree on a shared definition of the concepts curriculum, syllabus, curriculum development and syllabus design. This disagreement or lack of consensus has contributed in creating certain misconceptions, misinterpretations and consequently a misuse of these concepts among teachers. Hence this article is meant to clarify these concepts to facilitate their understanding and to help teachers and students access the body of knowledge linked to educational research and curriculum theory and, thus ground their decisions about curriculum and syllabus.

**Keywords:** curriculum ; syllabus ; curriculum components ; syllabus design; process; product; methodology.

### ملخص

هناك خلاف بين الباحثين فيما يتعلق بمفاهيم المنهج والمناهج الدراسية، تطوير المناهج وتصميم المنهج. وقد ساهم هذا الخلاف وانعدام الإجماع في خلق بعض المفاهيم الخاطئة، والتفسيرات الخاطئة، وبالتالي إساءة استخدام هذه المصطلحات بين المعلمين. ومن هنا، فإن المقصود من هذه البحث توضيح هذه المفاهيم وتسهيل فهمها واستخدامها، وهدفنا هو مساعدة المعلمين والطلبة على الوصول إلى المعرفة المرتبطة بالبحوث التربوية ومنهجية المناهج الدراسية، وبالتالي الفصل بين المنهج والمناهج الدراسية.

الكلمات الدالة: المنهج؛ المناهج الدراسية؛ مكونات المناهج؛ تصميم المنهج؛ المنهجية.

### Résumé

Les chercheurs ne sont pas toujours d'accord sur une définition commune des concepts: programme d'études, programme, élaboration du programme d'études et conception du programme. Ce désaccord ou manque de consensus a contribué à créer certaines idées fausses, des interprétations erronées causant une mauvaise utilisation de ces concepts par les enseignants. Cet article vise donc à clarifier ces concepts, faciliter leur compréhension et aider les enseignants et les étudiants à accéder au corpus de connaissances lié à la recherche en éducation et à la théorie du curriculum, et ainsi fonder leurs décisions sur l'utilisation de ces concepts.

**Mots-clés:** programme d'études; syllabus; composantes du curriculum; conception du programme; processus; produit; méthodologie.

### **Introduction**

When reading the existing literature on language education, one can easily notice that the terms curriculum and syllabus are sometimes used interchangeably, i.e. one can replace the other, they are also sometimes differentiated and sometimes misused and misunderstood. Similarly, the concepts syllabus design and curriculum development are causing confusion among researchers and practitioners. The terms are familiar in school education, but more ambiguous in their usage in a higher education context (Fraser, Bosanquet, 2006).

Instructional curricula and syllabi are crucial components of language programs, they can take different shapes and can reflect various theories of learning and can be conceived in several ways. This article is first meant to address the confusion that exists in the literature between the terms curriculum and syllabus and



then to review the different processes and steps involved in developing a curriculum and designing a syllabus.

### **1. Curriculum /Syllabus**

Nunan (2004) has associated this disagreement among researchers and practitioners, about the terms curriculum and syllabus, with two main reasons. The first reason has to do with the differences between American English and British English. In America, syllabus and curriculum are used synonymously and refer to the same concept, i.e. the content of an individual subject. However, the two terms represent two different concepts in British English. Curriculum represents a general concept that involves consideration of philosophical, social and administrative factors, and these latter contribute to the development and planning of an educational program while syllabus is considered as a subpart of the curriculum, it is concerned with the specification of the content to be taught. (Nunan, 2004)

The second reason is directly linked to the fact that the concept of curriculum has changed through time. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the curriculum was traditionally defined as the course of study in a particular subject, or syllabus. Later, mainly with the rise of the school of progressivism, the curriculum has been regarded as the foundation of the teaching-learning process whether in a school, college, university or a training organization. The curriculum should handle the training of teachers, specify the textbooks to be used, develop instructional goals and plans, and establish standards. Thus, the concept of curriculum has drastically changed and it is expected to play a crucial role in ensuring an efficient function in any educational institution or setting.

Nunan (2004) suggests that a curriculum can be broadly concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose, and experience and the relationship



between teachers and learners. Put differently, the term curriculum refers to the “entire instructional process including materials, equipment, examinations, and the training of teachers, (Stern 1984).

Hence curriculum is expected to deal with all the pedagogical measures related to schooling or any other educational institution or system. Accordingly, we can speak of the school curriculum, or the university curriculum. In its narrowest sense, the term curriculum refers to the course of study or content on a particular subject, such as the linguistics curriculum, or the physics curriculum. It is, therefore, used as a synonym of syllabus. This latter is more localized and restricted to what actually happens in the classroom between teachers and learners as they apply a curriculum to their situation.

Clarifying the concept of syllabus is not an easy task either. If curriculum refers to “all aspects of planning, implementing, evaluating, and managing an educational program” (Nunan, 2004), the syllabus is its result. It is a more concrete term, referring to the actual events in the classroom, i.e. the application of a syllabus to a given situation (Candlin, 1984).

However, as perceptions of syllabus change, so do definitions. Pienemann (1985) sees the syllabus as “the selection and grading of linguistic teaching objectives” (Pienemann, 1985, p. 23), while for Breen (1984) it is “a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning” (Breen, 1984, p. 47).

A closer examination of both definitions, however, shows that they are not complete. Pienemann’s emphasis on linguistic objectives and neglect of the possible non-linguistic functions of a syllabus, and Breen’s focus on achievement seems to overlook the relationship between what is taught and what is learnt.



Another disagreement exists between researchers and applied linguists concerning the definition of the term 'syllabus design'. While some approaches narrow the use of the term, others consider it in a broader perspective. The narrow view restricts syllabus design to the selection and gradation of content, and thus separating syllabus design from methodology. Those who adopt a broader view question this strict distinction and wonder whether it is possible to separate content from tasks, mainly with the advent of communicative language teaching (Nunan, 2004).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define syllabus as follows: "at its simplest level a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learnt ...it reflects an official assumption as to the nature of language and linguistic performance" (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987, p. 80).

This definition is a traditional interpretation of syllabus that focuses more on outcomes than on the learning processes, it clearly separates syllabus design, which is concerned with the selection and gradation of content, from methodology, which deals with the specification of learning tasks, activities, teaching procedures and techniques. (Nunan, 2004)

According to the proponents of the broad approach, syllabus design should integrate both content (i.e. what learners learn) and methodology (i.e. how they learn it). Yalden (1984) rejects this separation and maintains that syllabus is connected with the learners' needs and aims and should integrate both content (the product) and methodology (the process) as it is clearly stated in the quote below:

*"The syllabus replaces the concept of 'method', and the syllabus is now seen as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of 'fit' between the*



*needs and aims of the learner (as social being and as individual) and the activities which will take place in the classroom". (Yalden, 1984, p. 14)*

Thus, following Yalden (1984), it is more convenient to follow the broad view and integrate both content and methodology when designing a syllabus rather than the narrow approach because today's language classes are more demanding in terms of tasks and learning by doing. Learners are willing to develop communicative skills, fluency, productivity, creativity and becoming active participants in the learning process. It is no longer possible to neglect the learners' needs and aims and their individual differences, and the teaching materials that are selected, adapted, or developed should fit those needs and aims.

White (1988) maintains that different realizations of syllabus design (being broad or narrow in focus) are influenced by three philosophical ideologies, namely: classical humanism, reconstructionism and progressivism. These latter dictate the orientation of the syllabus. But before going further in the discussion, we need to understand the link that exists between philosophy and syllabus.

When syllabus designers suggest the teaching of a particular body of knowledge, course or subject, they are required to describe or provide their philosophy for introducing that content. If they are unable to provide a pertinent description of their philosophy, then it will be very hard for them to convince others to accept their proposal. Hence, we can consider that philosophy is the starting point in any syllabus decision making and is the basis for all subsequent decisions regarding content, activities and learning experiences. Philosophy becomes the criteria for determining the



aims, selection, organization and implementation of the syllabus in the classroom.

Achieving or attaining a given standard is the major orientation of classical humanism and it is that standard that “constitutes both an ideal to be striven for and a heritage to be transmitted”. (Skilbeck, 1984, p.17). Thus, the major goal of such a value system is to promote broad intellectual capacities and mastery of controlled knowledge through conscious understanding, unit-by-unit learning and deliberate practice.

In language learning and teaching, this type of syllabus focuses on mastery of the language, i.e. the focus is on grammatical structures and accuracy, and the teaching method associated with this type of syllabus would be the grammar translation method. As it is maintained by Clark classical humanism favours a methodology which emphasizes “conscious study and deliberate learning under the teacher’s presentation of knowledge elements (i.e. language) and rules, which are divided and sequenced from the simple to the more complex. Learners are expected to produce the ends of the instruction in new contexts, for example, create new sentences using grammatical items and vocabulary learnt in class”.(Clark, 1987, p.7)

Reconstructionism gives rise to ‘objective-driven’ curricula and syllabi in which pre-set objectives in terms of learners’ needs are achieved. Clark states that reconstructionists express a special concern with ‘the practical aspect of education’ and he emphasizes ‘the promotion of an ability to communicate,’ and the teaching method related to this movement focuses on “rehearsal of eventual global end-objectives’ based on the performance of ‘various part-skills of a particular behaviour” ((Clark, 1987, p.18).

The development of notional-functional syllabuses is an example of such a value system. Notional-functional syllabuses set



objectives according to two elements, notions or concepts (e.g. time or space) and functions. Thus the syllabus is no longer determined solely by grammatical content, but also takes into consideration the communicative needs of the learners in terms of functions and notions.

Progressivism suggests a “learner-centered approach to education, which attempts to promote the pupil’s development.” It aims to achieve “growth through experience” (Clark, 1987, p. 49).

Learners are expected to learn by being involved in the learning process and engaged in creative problem-solving activities. Progressivism allows the teacher and learners to decide what to learn and how to learn it. The methodology under such a value system stresses the importance of providing opportunities for learners’ spontaneous learning through engaging them in communicative activities. In language learning this value appears to be very close to Breen’s (1987) view of process syllabus where learners’ learning process is highly valued.

Having dealt with the different definitions of the terms curriculum and syllabus, we shall now turn to the presentation of the different approaches and processes involved when developing a curriculum and designing a syllabus.

### **Curriculum Development**

Developing a curriculum is a challenging and demanding process. It requires considering the different elements or components that need to be integrated in the curriculum framework and the sequence in which they will be dealt with. For this reason, we can find different curriculum models in the literature, namely the Tyler’s model, the Taba’s model and the Skilbeck’s model.





Some of these models share certain similarities and common components, while others vary tremendously. In addition, some models are labeled as 'prescriptive' and follow a linear or cyclical sequence while others are considered to be 'descriptive' as they simply describe the process of developing the curriculum.

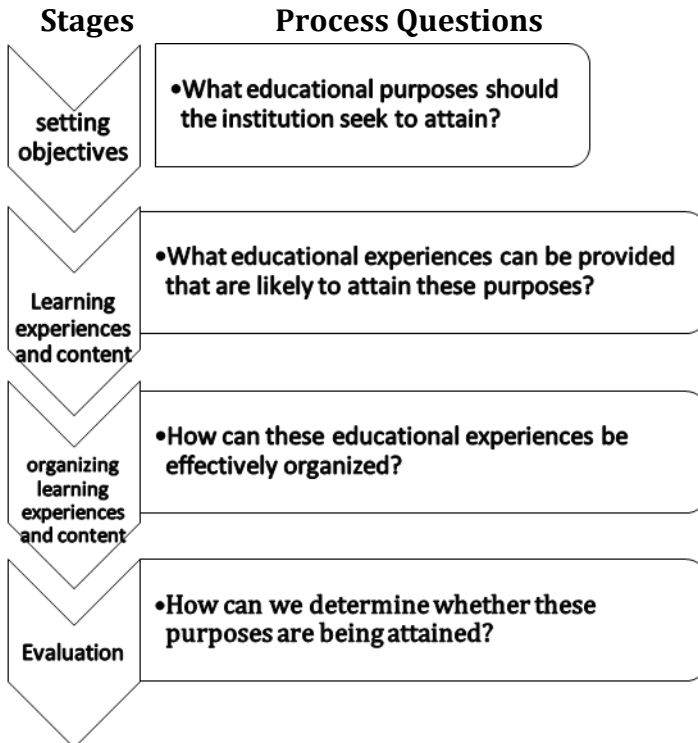
### - **Tyler's Model**

This model was introduced in 1949 by Tyler in his classic book: *Basic principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. It is one of the most famous models for curriculum development. The model is based on objectives or goal attainment and gives special attention to the planning phases. Tyler identifies four principles for curriculum development:

- **The selection of objectives:** defining appropriate learning objectives is important to establish a goal that all educators in a given institution are striving towards; the focus should be on what learners need to understand and what they are expected to do.
- **The selection of learning experiences:** establishing useful learning experiences and identifying what steps need to be taken to allow learners to meet their goal will be done by determining what classes/activities should learners take and participate in, and what resources need to be available.
- **The organization of the learning experiences:** It is essential to figure out the order of steps that need to be accomplished.
- **Evaluation:** it consists in assessing the curriculum and revising those aspects that have not proved to be effective.

It is important to answer the four questions following this order systematically because answering the latter questions presumes answers to the previous question in that linear order (Marsh, 2007).





**Figure1: Tyler’s Model of Curriculum Development**

**- Taba’s Model**

Another model of curriculum development was proposed by Hilda Taba (1962) in her book, Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice. Unlike Tyler who followed a deductive approach to curriculum development (i.e. as the model proceeds from general (needs of society) to the specific (specifying instructional objectives), Taba adopted an inductive approach starting with specifics and building up to a general design.

She held the view that the curriculum should be designed by the teacher rather than handed down by higher authority. The teacher is expected to begin the process by developing teaching-learning units for his/her students instead of developing a general curriculum framework. Taba’s model can be summarized in seven major steps as it is illustrated in the table below:

**Table 1: Taba’s model of curriculum development**

<b>Stage 1</b>	Diagnosis of learners ‘needs and expectations of society	the teacher, who is also the curriculum designer, starts the process by identifying the needs of students for whom the curriculum is planned
<b>Stage 2</b>	Formulation of learning objectives	After the teacher has identified needs that require attention, he/she specifies the objectives to be attained
<b>Stage 3</b>	Selection of content	The selected objectives suggest the subject matter or content of the curriculum. Content and objectives should match.
<b>Stage 4</b>	Organization of content	A teachers cannot just select content but must organize it in a certain sequence taking into consideration the maturity of the learners, their academic achievements and their interests
<b>Stage 5</b>	Selection of learning experiences	The teacher selects instructional methods that will involve the learner with content
<b>Stage 6</b>	Organization of learning experiences	Just as the content must be graded, so must the learning experiences and activities. Often their grading depends on the subject matter
<b>Stage 7</b>	Determination of what to evaluate and how to evaluate it	Evaluation procedures require to be designed to evaluate learning outcomes and determine what objectives have been attained

- **Skilbeck’s Model**



This model was introduced by Skilbeck (1984) in his book *School-Based Curriculum Development*. The school-based curriculum development (SBCD) begins with situational analysis and its main concern is to identify the situation or the context in which the curriculum is used as it is stated by Skilbeck: “the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the program of students’ learning by the educational institution of which those students are members” (Skilbeck, 1984, p.2). Thus, this model is based on the assumption that the major focus of the curriculum designer must be the individual school and its teachers, i.e. that school-based curriculum development is the most effective way of promoting genuine change at school level. The model has five major components as it is shown in the table below.

**Table 2: Skilbeck’s Model of curriculum development**

<b>Stage 1</b>	Situational analysis	a review of the situation (an analysis of the interacting elements that constitute it). Internal factors such as: teachers, students, institutional structures, external factors such as: societal expectations and changes, community values
<b>Stage 2</b>	Goal formulation	Goals derive from the situation analysis
<b>Stage 3</b>	Program-building	the selection of content to be learnt , the grading of teaching-learning experiences, the deployment of staff and the choice of suitable supplementary materials and resources
<b>Stage 4</b>	Interpretation and implementation	
<b>Stage 5</b>	Monitoring, assessment, feedback	Evaluating the curriculum and determining extent to which it meets its objectives.



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This model is dynamic and its elements are flexible, interactive and modifiable. It does not require a linear progression through its components. Teachers can begin at any stage and activities can develop concurrently.

**- Syllabus Design**

Nunan (2004) defines the syllabus as ‘a public document’ that should comprise a comprehensive list of content items, i.e. structures, words, topics, themes, functions, notions in addition to process items, i.e. tasks and activities. The objectives of the syllabus should be clearly stated and should match with the curriculum goals as the syllabus is a subpart of the curriculum. The syllabus may also specify a time schedule and designate a favored approach or method of teaching, (Nunan, 2004) describes some characteristics of the syllabus as follows:

**Table 3: Characteristics of a syllabus**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consists of a comprehensive list of             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-content items (words, structures, topics, ...)</li> <li>-process items (tasks, methods)</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Is ordered (easier, more essential items first)</li> <li>3. Has explicit objectives (usually expressed in the introduction)</li> <li>4. Is a public document</li> <li>5. May indicate a time schedule</li> <li>6. May indicate a preferred methodology or approach</li> <li>7. May recommend materials</li> </ol> <p>(Nunan 2004, p.177)</p>
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The syllabus is thus a blue print or a road map that regulates what happens in the classroom between the teacher and his/her students. Following Richards and Rodgers (1995), the syllabus is “the first component of the level of design” and the other components deal with the use of the syllabus “in the system by the learners and teachers as they interact with the instructional material.” (Richards, Rodgers, 1995, p.21)



Stern (1983, p. 23) maintains that a theory of language (structuralism, functionalism, interactionism) and language learning (behaviourism, mentalism, constructivism) is implicit in the practice of language teaching and becomes tangible and explicit in the syllabus. A syllabus thus mirrors a particular view of language and language learning. Several proposals for syllabus design can be found in the literature, and although each differs somehow in its point of reference, they all generally meet in their main dichotomies, i.e. product-oriented/process-oriented syllabuses (a dichotomy introduced by Nunan 2005), Type A/Type B syllabuses (White's distinction 1988) or synthetic/analytic syllabuses (Wilkins' dichotomy, 1976).

A product oriented syllabus focuses on the specific knowledge and skills that learners should master and acquire as a result of instruction. The learner is presented with a series of isolated linguistic units such as grammatical structures or vocabulary. These are taught individually in a linear sequence, and the learner is expected to make a synthesis of the separated parts and develop the whole system (Wilkins, 1976).

As an example of product-oriented syllabuses is the grammatical syllabus which is considered to be the most common and traditional syllabus. It is characterized by the assumption that language is a system composed of a set of grammatical rules that the learner is expected to learn then apply to practical language use. The syllabus input is graded in terms of simplicity and complexity.

A process-oriented syllabus focuses on the learning experience itself (Nunan, 2004). The learner is presented with chunks of language and he is expected to analyze language and to break it



into meaningful entities. In other words, the learner is required to negotiate meaning and make sense of the language by engaging in a bank of activities and tasks. This category of syllabuses attempts to answer or address the question of how language is learned, and the starting point is the learning processes learners go through while acquiring knowledge and skills and the communicative purpose for which language is used. (Nunan, 2004, p. 42) An example of process-oriented syllabuses is the task-based syllabus which is concerned more with the classroom processes that stimulate learning than with the language knowledge or skills that are supposed to be mastered. This syllabus consists of specification of the tasks and activities that the learner will engage in class in the target language.

Deciding on the theoretical assumptions underlying the syllabus is the first step in the design process. The next step consists of deciding what to include in the syllabus or its components. The suggested components are adapted from Richards and Rodgers' (Richards, Rodgers, 1995) framework for syllabus design:

- (i) goals and objectives;
- (ii) defining content and specifications for selection and grading of content;
- (iii) a specification of the role of learners: the kind of learning activities set for the learner, the degree of control learners have over the content, the recommended patterns of learner groupings, the view of the learner as a processor, performer, initiator, problem solver;
- (iv) a specification of the role of teachers: the types of functions performed by the teacher, the degree to which the teacher determines the content, the degree of teacher control over learning, the nature of interaction between teachers and learners;



- (v) a specification of the role of materials: their primary goal, their form, their relation to other sources of input, the assumptions the materials make about teachers and learners. Materials are defined as being anything used to facilitate the teaching/ learning process including course books, videos, handouts, flashcards, websites, and videos.

It is the syllabus that determines the kind of materials that will be selected and how they will be exploited in the classroom. Therefore, the materials are not regarded as an alternative to the syllabus, but tools among others used to fulfill the objectives of the syllabus. Materials are the most tangible and visible aspects of the syllabus. The last component deals with assessment: what do teachers test? And how?

### **Conclusion**

The present paper has been meant to address the confusion that exists between the terms curriculum and syllabus, curriculum development and syllabus design. It is an attempt to cover and present the different definitions and divergent positions of applied linguists and researchers regarding these concepts. Curriculum and syllabus are presented as two different concepts; arguments are provided to defend this view relying on theoretical assumptions and rationales. The curriculum is a plan for ordering and directing the teaching-learning experiences that students encounter in an educational institution.

The process of providing the plan and keeping it running smoothly is known as curriculum development. The curriculum should be regarded as an inclusive, comprehensive term that includes determination of aims and goals (planning), design, implementation and evaluation. Syllabus design is just a sub-component of the curriculum; but, the syllabus should mirror and





reflect the curriculum theory, its goals and objectives. However, one important point needs to be stressed and highlighted in that, it is a very challenging task for the curriculum designers to effectively comprehend the educational context (school, university or any other institution) and the culture of the society and develop a well-designed curriculum model that fits the different profiles of learners, answer the needs of society and its values and deal with the available resources.

Developing a curriculum is both a moral and societal activity, decisions need to be taken regarding the interests of the learners, parents and teachers. The needs of a given society must be met, in terms of its political stance and economic demands. It is a very complex issue as it also involves the transmission of values and culture.

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