

Syllabus Design in Teacher Education

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This paper reports on the process of designing a teacher education course offered by the British Council Mexico for teachers working in English/Spanish bilingual schools in Mexico. The author looks at the rationale and problems of attempting to create a coherent teacher education course and suggests ways of using the syllabus document to create a course that displays an overall relationship between the objectives, content and methodology used.

The Original Course

In September 1995 a course for teachers in bilingual schools was offered for the first time in Guadalajara under the auspices of the British Council to be given by three consultants of the British Council Mexico. This course will be discussed in sections, below.

Rationale and Objectives

"Every course should have a rationale" (Wallace, 1991, p. 141), which Wallace goes on to define as, "a reasoned explanation of what kind of course it is." (ibid). As far as the type of course is concerned, it was planned to be an in-service training course for teachers working in bilingual schools. The target population was teachers who already had teaching experience, but who needed some specialisation in bilingual education, that is, teachers at schools that were planning to, or were already using English as the medium of instruction for some of their content area classes. It was intended to attract both English language teachers in this kind of institution as well as content area teachers who spoke English, but did not necessarily have experience or expertise in giving their subject in a language which was not the learner's first language. The idea for such a course came about in response to the tremendous increase in the number of schools offering subject area in English and the concern expressed by many teachers to the course tutors that they did not feel qualified to be implementing the programmes that their directors were demanding of them.

The objectives of the original course were never overtly stated except in a broad aim written in a pamphlet produced to promote the course which stated the objective thus, "this course offers a specialization for teachers involved in bilingual education". The pamphlet went on to describe the five main content areas of the course:

- I Classroom management
 - II Language acquisition
 - III Research into bilingual education
 - IV Communicative techniques
 - V Teaching content in English
- (1995, The British Council Mexico/Colegio Inglés Hidalgo)

From this it should be clear that the objectives included the acquisition of both theoretical knowledge (II and III in particular) and practical techniques (I, IV, and V in particular) aiming to cater to the English language teacher and the subject teacher as well as administrators interested in knowing more about the reasoning behind educating learners in more than one language.

Selection Procedure

All prospective trainees were interviewed and asked to fill in a form about their education and experience. Apart from providing information about the teacher's experience and motivation, the form also acted as a needs analysis, but unfortunately due to time constraints the information was scarcely referred to when drawing up the syllabus.

Assessment Methods

It was decided that the evaluation procedure for the course should be as far as possible a developmental one with no grades being awarded, but rather feedback being given which was designed to help learners to improve in their areas of weakness. The idea was very much that "assessment can play a positive role in a teacher education course" (Wallace, 1991, p. 126). Basically, assessment was based on completion of these four areas:

1. A portfolio of six pieces of course work which ranged from noticing errors children made in language acquisition to writing lesson plans for teaching specific types of lessons. The participants could choose their own pieces of work for assessment and were free to submit any piece of work as many times as they wished to receive feedback.
2. Four observations, which included a self-observation, a peer observation, a learner observation and an observation carried out by a tutor. They were given guidelines and forms to fill out for all of these tasks.
3. The development of a piece of original teaching material together with the rationale for its use.
4. The design of an evaluation instrument along with the rationale.

Syllabus Design

Before examining and critiquing the first version of the syllabus in some depth I would like to first investigate some of the factors to be taken into consideration when designing a course and, more specifically, a teacher education course. By syllabus here, I am referring to some kind of programme that lays out what is to be taught during a course, but exactly what that programme should contain will be discussed later.

Process versus Product-Oriented Syllabuses

Firstly, there is an important distinction to be made between these two types of syllabus orientation. Based on Nunan (1988), a product approach to syllabus design means that the designer focuses on the end product of the syllabus. That is, s/he has objectives which refer to what the participants should know or should be able to do at the end of the course. The usual method for assessing such a course is a comprehensive test of what has been taught throughout the course at the end of the course, success in the test demonstrating the success of the learner and of the course. This objectives or ends-means model has been much criticised, notably by Stenhouse (1975) and his followers. It is argued that by specifying in advance the required outcomes of the course, the course designer is excluding those who are directly involved in the learning process, namely those who are taking the course and as such the ends-means model is authoritarian and does not take into account the unpredictability of the classroom situation (see also Prabhu, 1992).

Process-oriented approaches to syllabus design challenge this objectives approach and instead place the focus on the learning process. Instead of looking at the outcomes of a course before the course begins, the process-oriented syllabus designer asks her/himself what the processes are that would cause the learner to acquire the knowledge and skills s/he needs and wants from the course. The ensuing syllabus is a series of activities that will cause the learner to go through these processes.

The Negotiated Syllabus

The negotiated syllabus is one particular type of process-oriented syllabus. As the name suggests, this type of syllabus is drawn up after negotiation with the course participants and, the 'instructor' instead of being the one who imposes the course content becomes just one more voice in the decisions about what should be included in the course. This model has the obvious advantage that it takes into consideration the participants' individual needs and tailors the course to meet those needs, but has the disadvantage that it is far more difficult for the course designer in that s/he cannot arrive on the first day of class with her/his pre-packaged 'course', but must first discuss this with the participants and be willing to make changes throughout the duration of the course, perhaps even disagreeing with what it is the participants feel they need from the course.

Teacher Training Course Design

Realistically, it is difficult to develop and promote a teacher education course designed wholly on a negotiated basis when participants are not familiar with this type of approach and, from a syllabus designer's point of view, there are clearly areas of a teacher education course that one is able to predict and specify before the course begins (in the case of the course for bilingual school teachers, techniques for teaching content area in English,

types of bilingual programs and bilingualism, etc). It may be possible and desirable to have at least one section of such a course open to negotiation with the participants or do as Littlejohn (1995) suggests and prepare participants for a negotiated syllabus by at first giving them just one section that they can negotiate leading up to a totally learner-centred curriculum later. Whether such an approach is practical in a short one-off course, like the one I'm describing, must be questioned.

Wallace's 1995 'Teacher Training Descriptor' provides, I feel, a very good starting point for the kinds of issues that need to be taken into consideration when designing a teacher training course (see Figure 1).

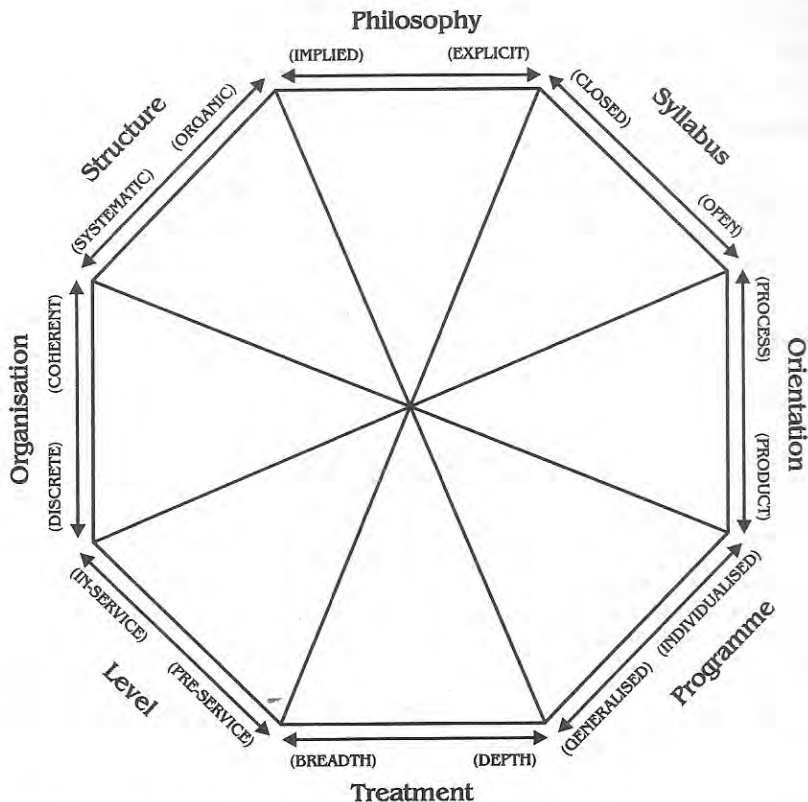


Figure 1. Teacher Training Descriptor (Wallace, 1995)

Firstly, the course designer has to take into consideration the philosophy underlying the course and how explicit s/he is going to state this. Secondly, s/he has to consider how much of the syllabus is decided (closed) and how much is open to negotiation (open). This is obviously closely related to the third aspect which I have already discussed above; is

the orientation of the course towards a product or process-based approach? Another related issue is how generalised the course is to be, for example does the nature of the syllabus mean that it could be given anywhere in the world (such as the Cambridge ESOL COTE/ICELT syllabus, for example) or is it very much tailored to the individual needs of a specific group of participants or is it somewhere in-between, perhaps designed with a specific country in mind? What level of treatment are the content areas specified on the syllabus to receive? Does the course aim to cover a lot of material and ideas quite superficially or is it narrower in scope with more emphasis placed on detail and depth of understanding of fewer topics? On the question of level, Wallace's diagram illustrates a very important point, that all participants will probably be at different levels. Even if the course excludes pre-service teachers, in-service teachers all come to the classroom with varying degrees of experience, both in terms of time and variety. How is the course going to deal with this variation amongst participants? The next aspect Wallace mentions is that of whether the syllabus is to be made up of a series of 'discrete' topics or whether it is to have 'coherence' and to what degree. Wallace divides 'coherence' into 'synchronic coherence', which refers to how the presentation of different subjects complement each other in the sequence in which they are presented, and 'sequential coherence', which is in reference to how the same topic is developed throughout the course. The final point is that of the structure of the course, whether it is to be totally systematic or whether there is room to any degree for the course to grow in its own way as it progresses.

This returns once more to the question of open/closed and product vs. process approaches; there has to be a way to find a balance between creating a rigid course which is prescriptive in nature and contains little or no built-in flexibility and adaptability to the particular context, and starting a course with *no* structure and asking participants to design their own course. These, then, are the kinds of questions that course designers need to ask themselves when designing a teacher education course.

So, is a syllabus merely a list of content items to be taught in the course? Clearly, the answer is no if we look at Wallace's descriptor. A syllabus document will undoubtedly need to include more information than this if it is to have coherence.

The Protosyllabus versus the Pedagogical Syllabus

Yalden (1987) makes an important distinction worth mentioning here. She talks about the "protosyllabus" and the "pedagogical" syllabus (p. 89). The protosyllabus is basically a description of the content to be covered while the pedagogical syllabus is a more detailed specification of the teaching, learning and testing approaches, including the materials to be used and the assessment instruments. This obviously has important implications for the relationship between content and methodology which will be discussed further later.

Description and Evaluation of the Old Syllabus

I'd now like to look at the original course in terms of the process of designing, writing teaching and evaluating a 120-hour course for teachers teaching in Bilingual English-Spanish schools in Guadalajara.

Writing the Course

Basically, each of the three instructors drew up a 'skeleton' suggested list of topics that we felt needed to be included and presented it to the other two instructors, between us deciding what needed to be added or taken away. We then chose the topics that we would be interested in teaching, based on our particular interests and areas of research and experience. We then put the topics in some kind of order according to the time that we had available on the dates of the course. The syllabus for the first part (approximately one third) of the course looked like this:

23rd September 1995	Introduction to the course Language Acquisition I
30th September 1995	Language Acquisition II Classroom Management
7th October 1995	Lesson Planning Instructions and Feedback
14th October 1995	Communicative Activities Listening Skills
21st October 1995	Error and Correction
28th October 1995	Second Language Acquisition
11th November 1995	Bilingual Program Models Teaching Reading
18th November 1995	Using Video Lesson Planning Workshop

Looking at the old syllabus critically, it was not so much a "statement of content which is used for the planning of a course" (Nunan, 1988, p. 6) as a series of discrete teacher training sessions. There was very little link made between the sessions except for the fact that some sessions had two parts, for example, Language Acquisition I and II. The absence of objectives was also noticeable as was the statement of any kind of explicit rationale or philosophy behind the course. In terms of the other factors mentioned in Wallace's descriptor, they are largely left to the discretion of the individual teacher due to the discrete nature of the syllabus, for example, how individualised and how organic the course could vary from session to session as would the breadth or depth of the material covered.

From the outset there was certainly no plan to have a part of the course open to negotiation, but in practice there were opportunities for the participants to express any particular needs or ideas for input.

Teaching the Course

As already mentioned, the course was taught by three teachers, although a fourth teacher was invited to participate on two occasions, because none of the regular instructors were available on certain dates. This is clearly another problem of coherence as sessions were given by different instructors based primarily on availability.

How Did We Evaluate The Course?

Evaluation of Programmes (i) *Summative*

Summative evaluation is that kind of evaluation which is given at the end of the course and really looks back over the whole course and asks what the course was like. It is designed to gain either or both qualitative and quantitative data. At the end of the course a questionnaire was administered to participants with seven questions and space for comments in each of the four areas of content, methods, materials, schedule and the results were very positive from the eleven out of twelve participants who answered the questionnaire (they were asked to circle 1 (poor) -5 (excellent) and all circled 4 or 5 for each question). The question of how far this really reflects the opinion of the participants and how far they were saying what they thought we wanted to hear has to be taken into consideration. This is always a problem with participant-respondent questionnaires, which, of course, call for subjective opinions.

As for comments about the course, the factor that was mentioned by four participants was that the section on teaching content area in English should be expanded and improved, but apart from that there were no other comments voiced by more than one participant. The questionnaire and results can be seen in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

The instructors were also asked to write their reflections on the course in terms of what was good about the course and what aspects needed improvement. On the positive side it was felt that the group responded very well and there was good rapport among the participants and with the instructors, but on the improvements to be made side, it was felt that there was too much of a bias towards EFL (understandable considering the background of the instructors) and that EFL and ESL/Bilingual education were treated as separate entities rather than looking for ways to integrate the ideas from the two fields.

The instructors agreed that there was a lack of congruency and integration of ideas and reflections amongst us.

(ii) *Formative*

Formative evaluation asks what happens during the course. This was also carried out to some extent, but was of a very informal nature with instructors asking participants about anything they would like to change and making a couple of minor changes.

(iii) *Process*

Formative evaluation comes from the participants, but is basically designed for the implementers, whereas a process evaluation tends to be more participant-centred and asks them to focus more on themselves and what is happening to them as individuals while taking the course. There was really very little of this form of evaluation done on the course and it is something that was incorporated in the new syllabus. The arming of the portfolio was actually designed to act as a process evaluation for teachers. As already mentioned, the participants had the opportunity to repeat homework as many times as they wanted and, in theory, the putting together of their portfolio should have caused them to reflect on their development in the various areas. However, unfortunately, there was no time to actually sit down with participants and discuss their portfolios which really missed one of the vital stages of portfolio assessment.

Wallace has six points that he says should make up assessment and of those six points I feel the most important of these is the area of assessment as an "integrating device" (1991, p. 126). That is, Wallace asserts that assessment should help participants to make links between the different sections of the course.

Lessons Learnt from the Old Syllabus

The first problem was really that of defining clearly our objectives and philosophy for the course and arguably something about the methodology to be used, although as Nunan points out "some language specialists believe that syllabus and methodology should be kept separate" (1988, p. 6). A course such as this one needs to be more clearly defined in terms of its philosophy and aims and certainly needs to have been planned to some extent before the prospective participants are interviewed.

The above led to the main problem which was the area Wallace calls coherence. This is to be expected when three different instructors are giving the course, especially taking into consideration that we had little time for discussion of course content and methodology. In effect it turned out to be a series of discrete topics (no synchronic coherence), the only coherence really being that created by each individual instructor (some sequential coherence). We made it a rule to give a copy of our lesson plan and any materials used to the other instructors, but how far we consulted each other's work in the hope of creating links with what was to follow is questionable. This is where the importance of the syllabus itself comes through. The syllabus should be detailed enough to guarantee some degree

of coherence, but at the same time it should not be so rigid that teachers with different ideas and areas of expertise should not be able to follow it and have the freedom to include their own areas of interest. As Widdowson points out, the syllabus "...becomes a threat to learning 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" (1984, p. 26 in Nunan, 1988, p. 6).

The new syllabus became then a detailed form of Yalden's (1987) protosyllabus, whereby the syllabus remains mainly a description of content, but includes more detail in terms of the topic areas and what the objectives for participants are.

The Newly-Designed Syllabus

Drawing on the format used for the UCLES CTEFLA (1994) syllabus, which I feel represents a good compromise as regards the question of how far the syllabus should state the methodology, the new syllabus looks like this. The first part consists of the overall objectives of the course, each overall objective having a corresponding topic section in the syllabus overview and finally each topic section is developed to show what skills and knowledge the participants will be expected to develop.

Objectives

OBJECTIVES

The Bilingual School Teacher Training Course is designed to enable participants to:

1. Develop an awareness of how people learn languages and particularly a second language.
2. Develop an awareness of how people learn.
3. Develop an awareness of how using English as the medium of instruction in schools can affect language learning and learning content.
4. Develop their skills for effectively managing the English language teaching and content area classroom.
5. Develop familiarity with techniques used in the English language teaching classroom and their application to other subject areas taught in English.
6. Develop techniques for teaching learners academic subjects in a language which is not their first language.
7. Develop skills in designing materials and using and adapting resources that are available in order to teach English through content area.
8. Develop methods of assessment appropriate to the subject matter and techniques that they are using in class.

(The British Council, 2000)

Notice here the use of the term 'develop' for the objectives of the course, conveying the idea of the course as a 'process-oriented' syllabus rather than a 'product-oriented' one.

Breakdown of the Topics

Each objective from the list of objectives above was then broken down into different topic areas. For example, Objective 1 was labelled Topic 1 Language Acquisition as shown below.

Topic 1: Language Acquisition
 1.1 Theories of first language acquisition
 1.2 Theories of second language acquisition
 1.3 Factors that affect language learning
 1.4 Language learning theories in the classroom
 (The British Council, 2001)

The other objectives became topics 2-8 with each topic being outlined and divided into sub-sections.

Objectives of Each Topic

Next the objectives are stated for each sub-section of each topic, so, for example, topic 1 looks like this:

TOPIC 1 LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

CONTENT	OBJECTIVES
1.1 Theories of first language acquisition	At the end of the course participants: are familiar with, and use terminology and ideas from different theories of first language acquisition
1.2 Theories of second language acquisition	are familiar with and use terminology and ideas from research into second language acquisition
1.3 The factors that affect language learning	are familiar with research into learning and some of the results as regards how languages are learnt
1.4 Language learning theories in the classroom (The British Council, 2001)	are familiar with the ways language learning theories have been used in teaching and can develop their skills in applying some of the ideas in their own classroom

How Can Syllabus Design Help with Implementation?

This created a fairly lengthy, detailed document. The next challenge was the implementation of the course using the syllabus document. Obviously, the simplest way for the syllabus to help with implementation would be to say that it should be followed as it is written in chronological order, but this obviously fails to take into account how many of the topics overlap and may belong in more than one topic area (for example, teaching learning strategies) and would not provide the links and interrelationships that are necessary.

However, by comparing the new syllabus with the original syllabus it is clear how the new syllabus helps with implementation and hopefully overcomes the largest problem, namely coherence, to a large extent. When planning the exact timetable of classes to be given, it is clear to both the instructor and the programmer where each particular session fits into the syllabus. It is even written on the timetable, for example,

Session 1

3.2 Bilingual Education in Mexico

3.1 ESL vs. EFL

4.3 Interaction patterns in the classroom

The numbers to the left refer to the number of the sub-section in the syllabus and allow the instructor and the participant to see clearly which objectives are being worked on, while still allowing for variety in the training room, in terms of the topics covered and methods used.

It is perfectly possible of course for one session to be working on more than one objective, and, by writing explicitly the number of the objective, full coverage of the objectives is ensured. It also allows links between topics to be established.

The Relationship Between Content and Methodology

"Failure to provide links between goals, content and learning activities can lead to a situation in which the desired outcomes of a programme are contradicted at the classroom level" (Nunan, 1988, p. 96). In the syllabus there is no actual mention or guidelines as regards methodology or learning activities; it is clearly a protosyllabus in Yalden's terms. However, it is clear that to some extent the objectives and the content must influence methodology. There will be of course some "received knowledge" (Wallace, 1991, p. 14), but this does not mean that the methodology should be one of "training as transmission" (Breen et al, 1989, p. 114). This is an in-service course and includes a fair bit of classroom observation so there will automatically be a lot of reference to "experiential knowledge" (Wallace, 1991, p. 15). The very wording of the general objectives of the course, 'develop an awareness', 'develop familiarity', 'develop skills' and so on, are already making some implications about the methodology to be used. This suggests a process approach whereby the participants will not be expected to 'gain' the knowledge in one go, but rather will be expected to, over time, adjust and refine their ideas through their learning experiences. For example, in section 4.5, Error correction, the objective is that "participants are aware of different techniques for correcting learners errors (both spoken and written) and have criteria for deciding which is the appropriate technique for each activity and classroom event." This implies that they be presented with alternatives (hopefully derived from their own experiences) and, through discussion and experimentation they will be able to make an assessment of these alternatives.

Assessment of the Course

The evaluation section has been developed a little more according to the content of the syllabus. There should be some piece of work in the portfolio which can be seen as developing each one of the general aims as well as the observations which should be considered in light of the aims. However it is important in terms of coherence again, that "the assessment should ... act as an integrating device, serving to strengthen the overall coherence of the course." (Wallace, 1991, p. 126) The pieces of work will obviously vary due to the diverse nature of the content in terms of theoretical knowledge and practical skills to be developed.

Developmental Observation

The observation form used by the tutor observer is a fairly flexible one and offers scope for a developmental approach. For example, teachers are given the opportunity to discuss and request that the observer looks at particular aspects of her/his teaching which also implies a pre-observation meeting. There are now two observations carried out by the instructors per participant to reinforce the idea of observation for developmental rather than assessment purposes.

Process Evaluation

The training course or programme must include evaluation of its outcomes and effects. This will be most informative for trainers if it occurs during the process of training and if there is subsequent evaluation by the teachers in terms of what happens in their classrooms. (Breen et al, 1989, p. 135).

Perhaps the simplest and most effective way to implement process evaluation is to ask participants to keep a diary which the instructor can focus on a specific topic after every session with a few questions. For example, after a session on adapting materials for second language learners, participants are asked to record in their diary for that week how they adapted materials and how this worked. In this way, participants are reflecting on their teaching performance and are creating links between what they are seeing in class and their teaching, hopefully becoming more aware of particular aspects and developing in this area.

The final process evaluation of the course comes from the instructors. We agreed that we would spend more time observing each other and trying to make this course into a "coherent training experience" (Wallace, 1991, p. 153). The existence of a planned syllabus document has certainly helped to this end and the course has been given now seven times.

As a final reflection I should like to add that, not only is syllabus design useful for the general development of a training course, but for the designer(s) it is an excellent way to create awareness and involvement in

the teaching of the course. This is a very strong argument for teachers and teacher trainers to be involved in syllabus design and syllabus modification of courses that they are currently teaching.

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Appendix 1: The questionnaire given to participants at the end of the course

**BILINGUAL TEACHERS
TRAINING COURSE**

1. CONTENT

How relevant was the content to you and your teaching?

IRRELEVANT 1 2 3 4 5 RELEVANT

COMMENTS _____

2. TEACHING METHODS

Do you think the teaching methods were interesting/ appropriate?

NO 1 2 3 4 5 YES

COMMENTS _____

3. MATERIALS

How useful do you think the materials were?

USELESS 1 2 3 4 5 USEFUL

COMMENTS _____

4. SCHEDULE

Do you think the schedule was satisfactory?

NO 1 2 3 4 5 YES

COMMENTS _____

5. What sessions/topics did you particularly like or find useful?

6. What sessions/topics do you think need improvement or expansion?

7. Are there any topics that you feel were missing from the course?

Appendix 1: The results of the questions on the evaluation questionnaire. (Questions 1-4)

	Q1 RELEVANT	Q2 METHODS	Q3 MATERIALS	Q4 SCHEDULE
Participant 1	5	5	5	4
Participant 2	5	5	5	4
Participant 3	4	5	5	3
Participant 4	4	5	4	4
Participant 5	5	5	5	4
Participant 6	5	4	4	5
Participant 7	5	5	5	5
Participant 8	5	5	5	5
Participant 9	5	5	5	5
Participant 10	4	4	4	5
Participant 11	4	5	5	5
	4.636363636	4.818181818	4.727272727	4.454545455