Applied Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Unit 5: Foreign Language Curriculum and Syllabus Design

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Main issues of this unit

- What is a curriculum?

- What is a syllabus?

- Defining characteristics of syllabi.

- Organising principles of syllabi.

- International perspectives on curriculum development and the Greek case.

- The new Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum.

- Steps in designing a course.

- Expressing objectives.

- A priori and a posteriori syllabi.

A clarification of terms

The terms **curriculum** and **syllabus** are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes differentiated, and sometimes misused and misunderstood.

What is a curriculum?

What is a curriculum? (1/2)

- Curriculum refers to **all those activities in which children engage under the auspices of the school**. This includes not only what pupils learn, but how they learn it, how teachers help them learn, using what supporting materials, styles and methods of assessment, and in what kind of facilities.

- Curriculum is a **theoretical document** and refers to the **programme of studies** in an educational system or institution.

What is a curriculum? (2/2)

- Curriculum deals with the **abstract general goals of education** which reflect the overall educational and cultural philosophy of a country, national and political trends as well as a theoretical orientation to language and language learning.

- A curriculum provides the **overall rationale** for educating students.

What questions does the curriculum address? (1/3)

- What is the purpose of educating students in this particular institution/ educational level?

- What kinds of knowledge should students be taught?

- What kinds of learning experiences do the students need to go through in order to acquire the knowledge and achieve our purposes?

What questions does the curriculum address? (2/3)

- What kinds of teaching methods should be used to help students acquire the knowledge and achieve our purposes?

- How should these learning experiences be organised?

- How should we assess learners in order to see whether the purposes have been achieved?

What questions does the curriculum address? (3/3)

By answering these questions, a curriculum provides information on:

- the goals of education,

- subjects to be taught,

- activities learners should be engaged in (how)

- methods and materials,

- allocation of time and resources and

- assessment of students and of the curriculum itself.

Curriculum vs. Syllabus (1/3)

A curriculum is concerned with making **general statements** about language learning, learning purpose, and experience, and the relationship between teachers and learners.

A syllabus is **more localized** and is based on the accounts and records of **what actually happens at the classroom level** as teachers and students apply a curriculum to their situation.

What is a syllabus?

What is a syllabus? (1/1)

- At its simplest level a syllabus can be described as **a statement of what is to be learnt**. Syllabus refers to the **content or subject matter** of an individual subject .

- It is a **detailed and operational document** which specifies the content of a particular subject. It is a kind of **plan** which translates the abstract goals of the curriculum into **concrete learning objectives.**

Curriculum vs. Syllabus (2/3)

While a curriculum is a theoretical, policy document, a syllabus is a guide for teachers and learners that indicates what is to be achieved through the process of teaching and learning.

What does a syllabus include?

- **Narrow view of syllabus design**: a syllabus is only concerned with the specification of learning objectives and the selection and grading of content.

- **The broader view** argues that a syllabus is not only concerned with the selection and grading of content but also with the selection of learning tasks and activities. In other words, syllabus design is also concerned with methodology.

Requirements of a syllabus (1/3)

- The course plan should provide an accessible framework of the knowledge and skills on which teachers and learners will work.

- It should offer a sense of continuity and direction in the teacher's and learners' work.

- It should represent a retrospective account of what has been achieved.

- It should provide a basis on which learner progress may be evaluated.

Requirements of a syllabus (2/3)

- It should be sufficiently precise so that it may be assessed through implementation as being more or less appropriate for its purposes and users.

- It is a document of administrative convenience and will only be partly justified on theoretical grounds, and so is negotiable and adjustable.

Requirements of a syllabus (3/3)

- It must harmonise the three contexts within which it is located:

  - the wider language curriculum,

  - the language classroom and the participants within it,

  - the educational and social reality that the course-plan is supposed to serve.

Curriculum development in the UK, in the US and in Greece

Curriculum development in the UK (1/2)

National curriculum introduced in the mid 80's. The national curriculum entails a broad description of the **general aims/goals** to be realised within the school.

It also includes:

- broad descriptions of the **content or subject matter** of individual subjects, in the form of "**can-do statements**" which imply processes of teaching and learning,

- broad descriptions of **evaluation** of all the learning experiences planned for pupils through classroom instruction.

Curriculum development in the UK (2/2)

Syllabi are designed at school level, by teachers who are in a subject specific department.

Each Department's teachers are also responsible for choosing textbooks available in an open market and for designing support teaching and learning materials.

Curriculum development in the US (1/2)

- Follows a totally **decentralised** educational system and offers different opportunities to different groups of learners. There is **no national curriculum**.

- Curriculum and syllabus development is a **school project**, only sometimes following the general guidelines of the state and sometimes the municipality.

Curriculum development in the US (2/2)

- Many decisions are made at a school level, by teachers who are in a subject specific department and also decide what textbooks to use, how to use them and when.

- Department teachers are also responsible for designing support teaching and learning materials in accordance with the assumed needs of particular groups of learners.

Curriculum development in Greece

- Greece has a **centralized educational system** aspiring to ensure that all students in Greek schools receive the **same quantity and quality of education**.

- In Greece there are three documents that make up the curriculum:

  - the school curriculum,

  - the subject-specific curriculum,

  - the syllabus.

The school curriculum

The **school curriculum** [σχολικό πρόγραμμα] is developed by order of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs so that schools throughout the country follow exactly the same programme that specifies which subjects are to be taught, when and in what pedagogic circumstances.

The subject-specific curriculum

The **subject-specific curriculum**, [ενιαίο πρόγραμμα του μαθήματος] which is concerned with the structure, content and organisation of a particular course to be offered (for example, over a three year period in lower secondary school).

The syllabus

The **syllabus** [αναλυτικό πρόγραμμα], published in the government gazette [Εφημερίδα της Κυβερνήσεως]. The syllabus for each subject provides a very detailed description regarding the content of a particular subject; that is, WHAT is to be taught and learned in a particular class, as well as the way the object of knowledge is to be dealt with (HOW).

The "New School" (1/2)

In 2010 the Government announced a multi-fold reform programme affecting every level and every aspect of education under the title "The student first - The New School" (Hellas 2011 National Report).

The "New School" (2/2)

The programme involves reforms in the administrative structure of the educational system (governance and management structures), comprehensive reforms in primary, secondary and tertiary education, new "objective" criteria for the selection of school directors, school advisors and other management positions, and a strategy for system, school and teacher evaluation which was non-existent in Greek education.

What does this reform involve (1/2)

- A complete **redrafting of school curricula**, giving **autonomy to teachers** in the development of their syllabi and the choice of their teaching methods.

- The break with the "one textbook per subject" rule encouraging teachers to **develop materials** using multiple sources of information.

- The **integration of ICT** in teachers' everyday classroom practices.

What does this reform involve (2/2)

A **National School Curriculum** has been developed identifying the goals of education and the skills, values and dispositions the new curricula should aspire to develop in students. **Specifications** for the development of subject specific curricula have also been postulated. Each subject specific curriculum was accompanied by the development of its accompanying **Teacher's Guide** explaining and illustrating how the principles of the new curricula are to be applied in practice.

The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum

The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (1/2)

The IFCL constitutes a most needed framework for teaching foreign languages in school. The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) is **common for all the foreign languages** that are included -or may be included- in the curriculum in the future. Adopting a generic approach to language learning it is intended to apply to all languages that may, at some time, be included in the school curriculum (either as obligatory or as optional).

The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (2/2)

This in itself constitutes a major breakthrough since until recently languages were treated in the Greek school curriculum as separate clearly defined subjects and curricula for each foreign language were developed adopting different aims and promoting different approaches to language learning. Foreign language curricula for primary education were developed independently of curricula for secondary education adding to the incoherence and unsystematicity of foreign language education in Greece.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (1/7)

It is **common for all the levels of education** (Primary School as well as Junior and Senior High school) and it promotes a positive attitude towards the life-long learning of foreign languages.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (2/7)

With the new Curriculum, foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment **conforms to the six-level scale specified by the Council of Europe** comprising the European standard for language proficiency. The new Curriculum thus sets clearly specified, explicit learning goals and associates the teaching and learning procedures with the objective assessment of language proficiency.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (3/7)

It determines:

- the **overall illustrative descriptors** per language level as well as

- the **skills-specific descriptors** (can do statements) per language level (according to CEFR).

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (4/7)

For the first time in Greek educational practice, foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment is treated as an integrated whole with coherent structure and common, identifiable aims and is essentially decoupled from the organization of the rest of the curriculum in terms of school years. That is, students are grouped according to the level of their proficiency and not according to their age.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (5/7)

It is the first curriculum that is not based exclusively on what experts consider to be the object of learning in the foreign language but it incorporates detailed and extensive analyses of **empirical research data**.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (6/7)

It delineates what the student is expected to be able to do with the language.

It describes in detail which 'knowledge' the student should acquire at the different stages of education, but not how (methods, techniques) s/he should acquire it.

Features of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (7/7)

It is designed so as to become a tool at the hands of a teacher for:

- developing his/her own syllabus

- for organising his/her lesson making use of the available educational material or for creating supplementary material.

Content of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum

The IFLC specifies overall illustrative descriptors per language level (A1-C2) as well as the skills-specific descriptors (can do statements) per language level (according to CEFR) in relation to:

- reading comprehension

- writing production and mediation,

- listening comprehension and

- oral production and mediation.

Παράδειγμα: Περιληπτικοί Δείκτες για το Επίπεδο Α1 (στοιχειώδης γνώση) (1/2)

Οι μαθητές θα πρέπει να είναι σε θέση:

- Να κατανοούν και να παράγουν απλής δομής προτάσεις για να καλύψουν ανάγκες της καθημερινής ζωής, με λέξεις ευρείας χρήσης και τυποποιημένες εκφράσεις της καθημερινότητας.

- Να χαιρετούν, να συστήνονται, να δίνουν ή να ζητούν πληροφορίες για τον εαυτό τους, να ευχαριστούν, να κατονομάζουν αντικείμενα, να περιγράφουν έναν χώρο ή ένα άτομο με πολύ απλές δομές.

Παράδειγμα: Περιληπτικοί Δείκτες για το Επίπεδο Α1 (στοιχειώδης γνώση) (2/2)

Οι μαθητές θα πρέπει να είναι σε θέση:

- Να κάνουν διάλογο με ομιλητές που γνωρίζουν καλά τη γλώσσα-στόχο προκειμένου να καλύψουν βασικές ανάγκες επικοινωνίας, με την προϋπόθεση ότι ο συνομιλητής τους μιλάει αργά και είναι πρόθυμος να βοηθήσει την επικοινωνία.

- Να αποδίδουν στην Ελληνική ένα απλό μήνυμα που είναι γραμμένο στην ξένη γλώσσα.

Παράδειγμα: Αναλυτικοί Δείκτες για το Επίπεδο Α1 (στοιχειώδης γνώση) (1/3)

Οι μαθητές θα πρέπει να είναι σε θέση:

- Να κατανοούν το νόημα ενός σύντομου, πολύ απλά δομημένου πληροφοριακού ή περιγραφικού κειμένου αυθεντικού λόγου (ανακοίνωσης, πινακίδας, καταλόγου, αφίσας, σημειώματος, ηλεκτρονικής επιστολής) που αναφέρεται σε τυπικές καταστάσεις ή ανάγκες της καθημερινής ζωής.

Παράδειγμα: Αναλυτικοί Δείκτες για το Επίπεδο Α1 (στοιχειώδης γνώση) (2/3)

Οι μαθητές θα πρέπει να είναι σε θέση:

- Να εντοπίζουν συγκεκριμένες πληροφορίες σε λίστες ή σύντομα κείμενα με περιορισμένο λεξιλόγιο, απλές γραμματικές δομές και περιορισμένα προτασιακά σχήματα.

- Να αναγνωρίζουν αριθμούς, οικεία ονόματα (χωρών, πόλεων, προσώπων, κ.λπ.), απλούς προσδιορισμούς χρόνου (επιρρήματα όπως «χθες», «σήμερα», ημερομηνίες, ώρες, κ.λπ.), τόπου (τοποθεσίες, διευθύνσεις) και ποσότητας.

Παράδειγμα: Αναλυτικοί Δείκτες για το Επίπεδο Α1 (στοιχειώδης γνώση) (3/3)

Οι μαθητές θα πρέπει να είναι σε θέση:

- Να αναγνωρίζουν το περιβάλλον χρήσης τυποποιημένων εκφράσεων (λ.χ. ότι την πινακίδα «Μην πατάτε το γρασίδι» τη βρίσκουμε σε κάποιο πάρκο).

- Να έχουν επίγνωση απλών γλωσσικών στοιχείων που χρησιμοποιούνται για τη σύνδεση των προτάσεων (παρατακτικών συνδέσμων, επιρρημάτων).

The Appendices of the ICFL (1/2)

- Classifying the material expected to be taught according to the level of language competence:

  – APPENDIX 1. Language Resources: Aspects of Language Performance (language functions, language focus and text types).

The Appendices of the ICFL (2/2)

- Listing and classifying the language content of the foreign language textbooks (mainly school textbooks) as well as organising it according to the different levels of foreign language competence:

  - APPENDIX 2. Organogram of the school textbooks' content.

Course vs. syllabus (3/3)

A course is taken to mean a real series of lessons, what is actually delivered to students while a syllabus is a document which is more abstract. You and I may deliver different courses using different materials and having different groups of learners yet use the same syllabi. A course is the whole package including materials, lessons, resources, extra curricular activities, assessment etc. In other words a syllabus is part of a course.

Steps in designing a course

Step 1: Needs analysis

With the advent of the communicative approach in the mid 70's and the development of functional approaches and ESP, the central question for the syllabus designer was "what does the learner need to do with the target language" rather than what elements of the linguistic system was the learner expected to master.

Needs analysis: collecting information about and from the learners.

Objective vs. Subjective needs

Objective needs

Factual information about the learner. "Learner needs are seen solely in terms of the language they will have to use in a particular communication situation" (Brindley, 1989:63).

Subjective needs

Reflect perceptions, goal, priorities of the learner and include information on why the learner has undertaken to learn a second language and the classroom activities the learner prefers.

Information from needs analysis (1/2)

- General personal background.

- Language background.

- Attitudinal and motivational factors.

- Situations in which English is frequently used.

- Situations in which difficulties are encountered.

- Common communication problems in different situations.

Information from needs analysis (2/2)

- Frequencies with which different transactions are carried out.

- Perceived difficulties with different aspects of language use.

- Preferences for different kinds of activities.

- Suggestions and opinions about different aspects of learners' problems.

Step 2: Means analysis

- Considering the constraints. At this stage we assess our resources (people, materials, administrative arrangements) that are available to achieve the product specified by needs analysis.

- Time available for teaching, how it is distributed, classroom setting (size of class, number of students), resources available, number of teachers, level of training.

- Very important stage since without a clear understanding of the resources and constraints we may face difficulties in achieving the goals specified in the needs analysis.

Step 3: Specifying the objectives

- When needs analysis has been carried out to establish the purposes and needs of a given group of learners, a necessary step is to translate them into objectives. Objectives must be appropriate not only to learner needs but also to the constraints of the educational institution.

- Objectives state the outcomes of students' learning. Objectives can guide in the selection of structures and functions and tasks and can also give learners a clear idea of what they can expect from a language programme.

Example

- **Need:** Understanding lectures.

- **Aim**: Students will learn how to understand lectures given in English.

- **Objectives:**

  – Students will be able to follow an argument or thesis of a lecture.

  – Student will learn how to recognize the following aspects of a lecture: cause effect relationships, comparisons and contrasts, premises used in persuasive arguments, supporting details used in persuasive arguments.

Product vs. Process Objectives

Product objectives

These focus on the product of learning such as the language students are supposed to acquire, the skills they are supposed to develop or the kinds of things they are expected to do with the language.

Process objectives

These focus on the process of language learning, the kinds of experiences students will undergo in the classroom.

Step 4: Designing the syllabus (1/2)

After conducting the needs and means analysis and specifying our objectives, we need to decide what content will be included and how it will be sequenced:

- **Focus**: (what we choose to focus on will depend on our beliefs of the nature of language and language learning) Focus on particular aspects of target language knowledge or capability.

Step 4: Designing the syllabus (2/2)

- **Selection**: Given a specific focus, the syllabus designer selects particular items (grammar, functions) for teaching learning work.

- **Subdivision**: This involves breaking down selected content into manageable units. This is often hierarchical with superordinate categories and subordinate categories.

- **Sequencing**: Involves marking out of content along a path of development. Deciding the order in which the items should be taught.

A priori and a posteriori syllabi

A priori syllabus

- The most common and familiar approach to syllabus design.

- The content of the syllabus and objectives of the course are pre-specified (both have been determined in advance).

A posteriori syllabus

- Based on the assumption that what is pre-specified will not actually be learnt.

- Focuses on the processes of learning (not the product), on the kinds of activities students will be engaged in (these are pre-specified)

- The syllabus is induced. Can only be determined after the course is over.

References

Brindley, G. (1989). The role of needs analysis in adult ESL program design. In: Johnson, R .K. (Ed). *The second language curriculum* (pp.63-78). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

End of Unit

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Notes

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