

A Content Analysis of the English Language Development Courses in Bangladeshi University English Departments

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Abstract

Syllabus, as one of the most important tools of teaching-learning, must contain necessary contents. A clearly designed, well-presented syllabus with the contents following the best practices in the field is a prerequisite for effective teaching. To analyze the contents of the syllabi of English language development courses of Bangladeshi university English departments, this study prepared a checklist of an ideal syllabus following the relevant literature and theories. The study has found that the contents in those syllabuses are presented in a haphazard way. They cannot meet most of the criteria of an ideal syllabus in terms of contents. Most of them have only some learning topics or items as contents; and names of some books as materials. Regarding the other aspects like goals and objectives, assessment, rubric, teaching-learning methodologies, types of useful materials etc., the syllabuses present a very poor scenario. In the presentation and organisation, a linear fashion is found seemingly without any grading.

Keywords: curriculum development, syllabus design, syllabus contents, language teaching, tertiary level syllabus in Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Syllabus is an integral part of any teaching-learning enterprise. As a general term, a syllabus is a document that states what will or should be learnt or taught within a stipulated time and particular course, which, though in different forms, is an indispensable choice for guiding the teaching-learning to the objectives set in the curriculum/course/project. A course syllabus can serve as a highly effective facilitator of student learning (Grunert, 1997; Pastorino, 1999 as in Parkes & Harris, 2010). Like most countries of the world, Bangladesh also emphasizes that the students develop a workable knowledge in English. Thus, English is taught and learnt as a targeted second language. Here, teaching-learning of English starts from class one. After Higher Secondary level, students get into university where the department of English in most of the Public and Private universities conducts courses on English literature and linguistics.

Syllabuses up to HSC give the students grammatical knowledge with little scope to prepare themselves for the vast literature study and the real-world use of English. Thus, at the beginning of the university life, they need to have some courses to provide them insights into the upcoming literature and linguistic courses and developing various academic capacity enhancement abilities. At the same time, they need to develop generic awareness of the language related competence required in their perceived professions following their graduation level. To prepare the students for academic courses and future professional competence requirement, almost all of the universities run courses like Basic English, Functional English, English for Media, Spoken and Written English, Advanced English and so on to develop working knowledge of English.

To meet these aspects, the syllabus of those courses should be designed with special features regarding the course contents and goals, needs orientation, and teaching methodology etc.

Unfortunately, despite these courses, the students suffer from English language incompetence (Tasnim, 2001; Haque, 2006; Mamun, 2016). Mamun (2016) reported that most of the courses have been designed following syllabuses of other local and foreign universities and, only sometimes, the experts of this field have been consulted. In most cases, no needs analysis precedes the course design.

The objectives of the study are to conduct a content analysis of the English language development courses of

English departments of the selected universities and to unfold the characteristics of them by comparing them with the best practices of curriculum development. Undoubtedly, the analysis will lead to better understanding of the weaknesses and the strengths of the courses and help the authority concerned to design tailor-made ones with better impact.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

A syllabus is not only a ‘specification’ of items to be taught in an academic program. Of course, a syllabus “focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content” (Nunan, 1988, p. 8). It states the destination where a successful learner will reach after finishing the course. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 80) have reported that a syllabus puts on record the basis on which success or failure will be evaluated. However, there have been innumerable approaches to syllabus and syllabus design. Besides specifying what is to be learnt, a syllabus also signals how those contents will be learnt and in what order. The organization of a syllabus signifies which theory of language, learning and language use it has adopted. The order of contents shows the underlying principles for sequencing and grading.

Yalden has defined syllabus as an instrument by which the teacher with the syllabus designer achieves “a degree of ‘fit’ between the needs and aims of the learner and the activities which will take place in the classroom” (1984, p. 14). On the other hand, Widdowson has termed syllabus as “a framework within which activities can be carried out: a teaching device to facilitate learning” (1984, p. 26). Again, Allen has specified syllabus as a “subpart of curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught” (1984, p. 61) and this selection would be dependent on the prior identification of objectives, proficiency level and duration of course. However, a more conclusive contour of the syllabus has been demarcated by van Ek (1975 as cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 7), where the necessary components of a language syllabus have been selected as follows:

- 1) The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics which will be dealt with;
- 2) The language activities in which the learner will engage;
- 3) The language functions which the learner will fulfill;
- 4) What the learner will be able to do with respect to each topic;
- 5) The general notions which the learner will be able to handle;
- 6) The specific notions which the learner will be able to handle;
- 7) The language forms which the learner will be able to use;
- 8) The degree of skill with which the learner will be able to perform.

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that a syllabus, within the ambit of syllabus design, is a statement which selects the goals and objectives of a course, after observing the necessary situation and parties, selects contents to enable the learner in order to reach those objectives and grades content and activities in terms of skills, strategies and tasks. It also suggests the kind of materials to be used for successful goal-materialization and the methods of teaching and evaluation keeping in mind the potentials, available logistics and the needs of the stakeholders.

2. Method

In this qualitative study of understanding salient features of the English language development courses of the university English departments, a content analysis approach was taken. From the relevant literature and best practices, a core checklist was prepared against which the criteria of a good syllabus in terms of contents were selected. The previously mentioned type of syllabuses from the sample universities were collected and compared against the criteria.

At present, in Bangladesh there are 103 private and 41 public universities (UGC, 2018). For this study, four public and four private universities were taken. The deviation in the population could be checked as the students have spent equal time of study and they are the product of the same background, educational facilities and environment.

To select public Universities, two old and two new universities were selected. The old ones have come a long way and furnished their syllabuses which are now being adopted and/or adapted by the new ones. On the other hand, four private universities have been selected-one from the top-rated, three from the rest.

2.1 Sampling for Universities

(a) Public Universities

- 1) Dhaka University
 - 2) Rajshahi University
 - 3) Begum Rokeya University and
 - 4) Jagannath University
- (b) Private Universities
- 1) North South University
 - 2) Northern University Bangladesh
 - 3) World University Bangladesh and
 - 4) State University Bangladesh

2.2 Core Checklist for Syllabus Content Analysis

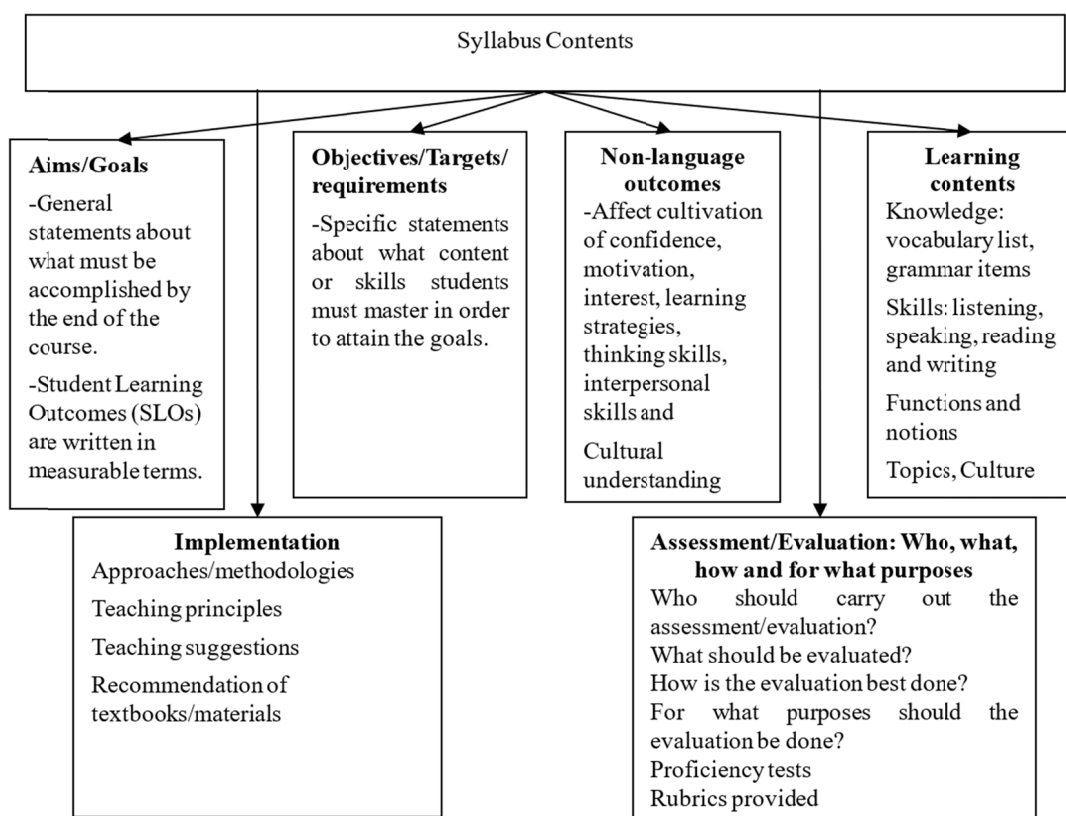


Figure 1. Syllabus contents

To elaborate further, a description of the criteria for an effective syllabus is given below (Adapted from UDL Syllabus Rubric):

2.3 Criteria for a Good Syllabus

Course goals and objectives: A syllabus should state what the students will be able to do after completing the course. Also, some specific objectives should be mentioned.

- a) Contents: There should be clear statement about the topics/skills/tasks/contents to be covered in the course.
- b) Instructor Information: Syllabus mentions different ways to contact the instructors for student questions or concerns. A brief overview of instructor should be there in the syllabus.
- c) Textbooks and materials: A syllabus, almost mandatorily, lists the required and recommended textbooks and other materials with information about publications, editions and writers.

- d) Course Assignments (explanation): A standard syllabus lucidly explains and links all learning objectives, course requirements/assignments, and appropriate due dates.
- e) Course Assignments (examples): Syllabus provides detailed guidance on how to complete major course projects, activities or papers and offers links to examples and illustrations as appropriate.
- f) Course Assignments (submission): Syllabus provides multiple ways for all students to submit course assignments.
- g) Course Assignments (grading): Syllabus stipulates grading criteria for all course requirements and offers detail on items requiring further clarification and links to instructor grading rubrics.
- h) Course Calendar: Syllabus and Learning Management System (LMS) utilize a course calendar to specify and periodically reinforce due dates, highlighting key course events and activities.
- i) Student Resources: Syllabus contains general information about student-oriented campus resources and highlights specific additional resources that may be unique to this course.
- j) Format (length): Syllabus is carefully crafted to provide sufficient information and guidance yet clearly links to additional resources and examples avoiding a text heavy document.
- k) Pedagogical options: Syllabus should clearly indicate which methodology with classroom activities will be used in the classroom Also what is the expectation from them should be indicated.

3. Results and Discussion

On the basis of the above criteria, the present syllabuses of the sample university English departments have been analyzed in broad perspective. Twelve characteristics were selected and against them, the syllabuses were scrutinized to determine whether the traits are present or partially present or absent.

3.1 Course Goals

Setting goals and objectives is of paramount importance. Graves (2000, p. 73) has rightly said, “How can you design a course if you don’t know where you want your students to come out?” Goals are general statements about the course, which are to be acquired through implementation of the related course phases or the ability the students will be able to show in post course phase (Brown, 1994). Planning of an effective course comprises selecting general goals articulating the main purposes and outcomes. Of course, these goals should be achievable and appropriate, which motivate the learners to take up the course and meet the needs—present and perceived. There may be one goal or more. The success of a course is measured in terms of the goals having been reached.

With this emphasis on goals, the present university syllabi have been analyzed. The situation is really disappointing. Out of fifty-three courses of the sample universities, only five courses (9.43%) are found to have clear goal statements. On the other hand, in sixteen courses (30%) goals are partially present. In the rest of the courses (60.34%), goals are not specified. Even in those cases where goals are partially present, they are given in an indirect way.

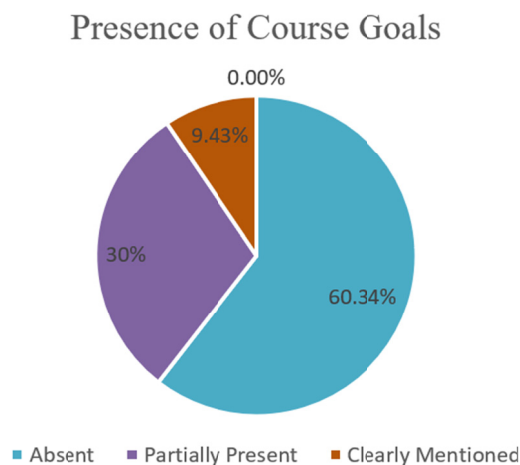


Figure 2. Goals statement in the syllabus

Thus, there is a scanty illumination of goals and objectives. Almost no course defines goals and objectives except a holistic view for the whole curriculum. Teaching cannot be imparted effectively to the classes of students with heterogeneous learning capacity. Those courses, which specify some goals, do so only in descriptive terms without specifying skills, activities or tasks or even assessment procedure though the course design and distribution types demand so. Hence, all the important tasks do not get equitable emphasis leaving pitfalls for successful acquisition of the skills needed.

3.2 Course Objectives

Objectives are the specific statements which reflect the goals. Each goal necessitates some particular steps, like necessary skills, to be materialized to attain the goal. Also, one objective can serve a number of goals or part of those goals. Thus, goals and objectives are related. In methodology and classroom activities, these objectives are aimed at fulfilling a goal which in turn makes the course being effectively implemented. Objectives give a clear impression to students about what and how they learn to get the best out of the teaching-learning activities. Bloom's taxonomy (1956) is a great source of how to write objectives.

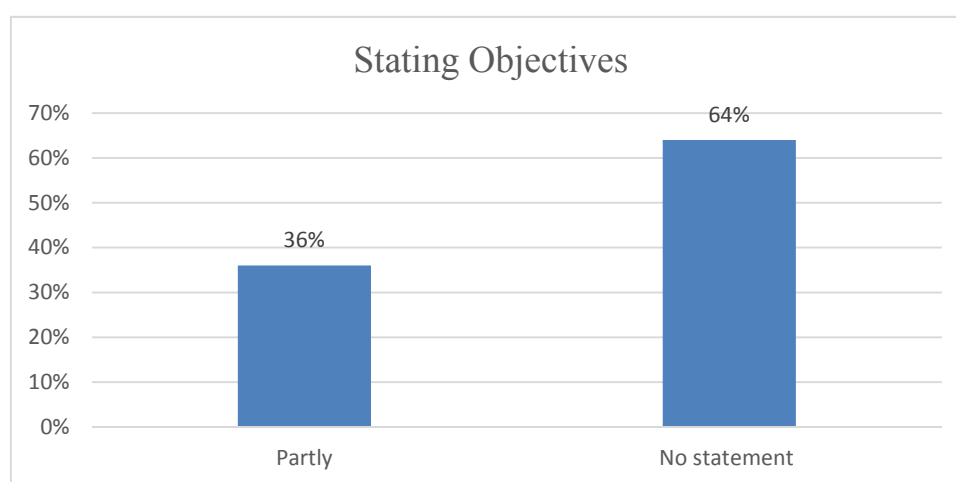


Figure 3. Statement of objectives

In the courses under analysis, 36% (19) courses have objectives written partly or indirectly. Sometimes holistic approach is taken. The other 64% courses have no objective like statements. No course has clear objectives stated. In a few cases, objectives are inserted into the contents. This is the result of disregarding the active participation of the learners in the process which has been strengthened by the fact that only in five percent cases some kind of needs analysis precedes formulation of objectives.

3.3 Contents Presentation

Whatever type of syllabus is designed or implemented, it must present the contents clearly. Fortunately, the picture regarding this in the present syllabi is fairly satisfactory. In about 55% courses, the contents are clearly presented while in 41.5% cases contents are quite clearly presented. Significantly, most of the syllabi are topic based. Though the topic is mentioned most of the times, sub-topics or sub-skills are out of the frame creating a haziness of the contents for the students. In two syllabuses, only the course title is given. All these presage somewhat unsatisfactory attachment to learners' clear understanding in course development procedure.

3.4 Instructors' Information

A mutual relationship between the course teacher(s) and the students can play a motivating role in classroom teaching. Every course is moderated and taught by one or more teachers or instructors. If the course syllabus has the names and other information of the concerned instructors along with other academic and communication related information, students can feel freer and fully knowledgeable of who they are going to pull together with. Unfortunately, none of the present courses has the name of the course teachers. Only the whole curriculum book/booklet/brochure has the name of the faculties with their academic qualifications. However, this is true with the DU and all private university syllabi. Other syllabuses do not have any information about who are the faculty members.

3.5 List of Textbooks and Other Materials

List of textbooks is a built-in part of a course syllabus. In addition, some other materials, optional or helping, should be mentioned. But in twenty-eight sample syllabuses (53%), materials and even core textbooks are not mentioned. In 19% courses, materials are partially present and only in 28% courses, they are sufficiently present.

In the syllabuses where materials are mentioned—only textbooks, core and helping books, and in a few cases online materials are mentioned. Rarely, information about the library facilities and books availability is hinted.

No teachers' books or guides or brochures have been found to be provided to the teachers. In two cases some indirect indication about the methodology and in some cases, classroom activity examples are given.

3.6 Specifying the Use and Availability of Logistics

Besides textbooks and materials, the syllabuses should mention what logistics will be used and how and where they will be available. What things a student should keep with them should be specified. Unfortunately, only one syllabus out of fifty-three has enough illumination on these issues. Five of them have partially mentioned use and availability of logistics. The other forty-seven (88.87%) courses do not have any such indication. Of course, some of the university syllabuses mention library facilities as a whole, not for an individual course.

3.7 Assessment Information

This is another aspect of syllabus framework. A syllabus records contents and at the same time, it should state in clear terms how the knowledge gained about the content will be assessed and when. In the present syllabuses, course specific assessment procedure is totally absent. Only in five syllabuses, an indirect or partial indication is given. Of course, holistically the examination system with general distribution of marks year wise/semester wise is mentioned.

Time frame and calendar of the assignment are also mentioned only holistically. Individually, forty-one of them have no such indication. Another aspect of assessment system is the specification of skills or rubrics. Only in eleven courses, they are partially present and in rest of the courses (79%), no such intimation is offered.

3.8 Approaches and Methodologies and Teaching Principles

This is a very important issue that syllabuses suggest teaching-learning approach and the methodology/ies to be used in the whole teaching-learning process let alone classroom teaching. It is also possible that a particular university adopts a particular approach. Still, it is necessary to fix up approach and methodologies for conducting a course whatever the contents of the learning may be, for effective and disciplined teaching. Without them, the teaching activities are like rudderless boats.

It also involves the indication of the principles of teaching-learning to be specified in the course syllabus. Whatever the contents are, whoever the teachers are, those principles should be adhered to during the whole academic enterprise, within the classroom or in the decisions beyond the classroom. Only in three courses, a slight indication is given and in 94% cases, no principles are mentioned, even indirectly.

3.9 Teaching Suggestions

Besides teaching methodology and approaches, teaching suggestions may be put for the use of both teachers and students. It can include what activities would suit the teaching goal specified, expected behavior of the students and so on. Unfortunately, only five courses have indirect teaching suggestions and in the rest of the courses (91%), no such indications are given.

4. Conclusion

The syllabuses have failed to satisfy most of the characteristics of a good syllabus both theoretically and pragmatically. The absence of some of the criteria like materials and textbooks, lack of information of the instructors may have happened due to over dependence on the teachers who might give the students the necessary materials and information but at the same time, it proves the poor management procedure at curriculum design level. It may have been absent from the course syllabus on the ground that the students are well aware of the textbooks and materials, which is a naïve approach. From the syllabus document analysis, the following conclusions regarding the problems and strengths can be drawn:

- a) A linear approach is apparent but with no grading principle
- b) Mostly, lecture-based methodology is used
- c) Grammatical/structural/situation approaches with little vent to Communicative ones
- d) They do not reflect that any needs analysis or reflective modification particularly in methodology and

materials selection phases have been considered

- e) Little difference between the universities regarding good syllabus criteria
- f) Traditional approach mainly structural with little innovation

However, teachers and the students are much tolerant, because out of this difficult situation, they are running teaching-learning activities and to a certain extent, they have become successful. Thus, the syllabus document analysis provides a solid ground for battering the system, for bringing in innovation and implementation of needs-based changes into the whole system from curriculum development to classroom teaching. It provides messages to the policy makers and authorities concerned even the teachers that the syllabuses should be revamped and must contain necessary information for making teaching-learning attempt an effective one.

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