

Visualizing the Syllabus: Engagement, Comprehension, and First Impressions in University EFL

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Abstract

This study investigates university students' perceptions and impressions of a visually stimulating syllabus, focusing on its effectiveness in conveying course expectations and its influence on initial impressions of instructors. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data from 168 university-level English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students in two universities in Japan. Students reviewed the visual syllabus and provided feedback through Google Forms surveys. Findings reveal students strongly favor the visually stimulating format for its clarity, engagement, and satisfaction. Additionally, the visual syllabus positively influenced the students' impressions of their instructors, enhancing perceptions of professionalism and approachability. These results suggest that visually enhanced syllabi can improve students' comprehension of course materials and foster a more engaging and inclusive learning environment. The study offers practical insights into syllabus design for educators seeking to align their teaching materials with the needs of modern learners.

Keywords: curriculum design, EFL, media in education, syllabus design, technology in education

1. Introduction

The syllabus is often considered the cornerstone of course design in higher education, serving as the “contract” between instructors and students (Farrow & Leatham, 2020). It delineates course objectives, requirements, policies, schedules, assignments, and grading, providing a roadmap for the academic journey that lies ahead (Farrow & Leatham, 2020). Traditionally, syllabi have been predominantly text-based documents, prioritizing detailed descriptions and extensive information in a linear format. While comprehensive, traditional text-based syllabi may not engage 21st-century students who are increasingly accustomed to a daily deluge of digital media and visually rich content. This study explores university students' impressions of an updated, visually stimulating syllabus or “visual syllabus.”

As advancements in media and technology continue, the education landscape is also expected to undergo certain transformations. The advent of digital technology and the proliferation of visual media have revolutionized the way information is consumed and processed. Students today are digital natives, more inclined towards interactive and visually appealing content (Rosenblatt et al., 2018). Educational practices must evolve to meet these changing preferences, making it essential for professors to keep up with technological advancements in order to support students' ever-evolving learning styles (Johnson et al., 2016). Despite this shift, many institutions continue to rely on the traditional text-based syllabus, potentially missing opportunities to enhance student engagement and comprehension.

A visual syllabus leverages design elements such as layout, icons, and segmentation to enhance readability and engagement. Kaur (2021) describes it as a “modernized approach” to syllabus design that aligns with the learning preferences of digital-native students. Nusbaum et al. (2020) further suggest that visual elements can positively influence students' perceptions of instructor professionalism and approachability. These definitions establish the visual syllabus as a possible “game-changer” in educational contexts.

The impetus for this research was to investigate whether a visually enhanced syllabus can indeed offer a superior alternative to the traditional syllabus format at the university level. By examining students' perceptions and preferences, this study aims to provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of visual elements in syllabus

design. The findings are expected to inform educators and institutions about best practices for creating syllabi that not only convey essential information but also engage students in a meaningful way from the outset of the semester.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and impressions of a visually stimulating syllabus, this study employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through surveys distributed to students on the first day of the semester, assessing their initial impressions and preferences regarding syllabus formats. Qualitative data were also collected through open-ended questions, allowing students to freely express their thoughts and concerns in detail. This combination of methods allowed for a nuanced analysis of how visual syllabus design influences student engagement, comprehension, and perceptions of instructor professionalism and approachability.

The significance of this research extends beyond mere preference; it touches upon the broader aspects of student success and retention. Engaged students are more likely to be motivated, attend classes, participate actively, and have a respectful attitude towards the teacher and their peers, factors for success inside and outside the classroom. A syllabus that captures students' attention and clearly communicates course expectations can set a positive tone for the entire semester, contributing to a more effective and enjoyable learning experience.

Moreover, this transition to a visual syllabus aligns with contemporary educational initiatives that emphasize student-centered learning (Richmond et al., 2018) and the integration of technology in the classroom (Middleton & Curwood, 2020). By leveraging visual design principles, educators can create syllabi that support diverse learning styles, including those of learners who struggle with dense text, especially when it is not written in their native language. This approach reflects a broader trend in higher education towards creating more engaging and inclusive learning environments.

Finally, this study seeks to illuminate the path for current and future educators who desire to set the tone for an engaging semester. As educational institutions strive to meet the needs of 21st-century learners, understanding how syllabus design impacts student engagement is crucial. The findings of this research will provide insights for educators looking to enhance their course materials, make better first impressions, and improve overall outcomes in the classroom. It is hoped that by embracing innovative approaches to syllabus design, a dynamic and exciting educational experience for both educators and students can be created.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Syllabus Definition and Purposes

A syllabus serves as a foundational document in higher education that outlines course objectives, policies, expectations, and schedules. Farrow and Leatham (2020) emphasized its role as a "contract" between teachers and students, ensuring clarity and accountability. Similarly, Harrington (2023) argued that an effective syllabus fosters transparency and establishes a roadmap for academic success. These definitions underscore the syllabus's dual purpose: to convey essential course information and to set a positive tone for the learning environment.

2.2 Syllabus Content Guidelines

Effective syllabus design aligns with course material design practices that prioritize clarity, accessibility, and relevance. Slattery and Carlson (2005) advocated for detailed yet clear syllabi that convey course policy with guidance. Meanwhile, Burke (2022) suggested incorporating equity-focused elements to address the diverse needs of students better, thereby fostering greater inclusivity, engagement, and equitable learning opportunities. These guidelines highlight the importance of customizing the syllabus content to facilitate supportive and effective learning experiences.

2.3 Do Students Really Read Standard, Text-Based Syllabi?

Research shows that traditional text-based syllabi often fail to capture the attention of students or facilitate class engagement. Overman et al. (2020) found that visually stimulating syllabi significantly improve comprehension compared to their text-heavy counterparts. Similarly, Kaur (2021) observed that infographic-style syllabi improved readability and comprehension, suggesting that standard formats may not align with student learning preferences. Kaur further noted that students read the infographic-style syllabus "more completely, feeling less anxious about the course, and more comfortable with its requirements" (2021). These findings call for rethinking traditional syllabus design to better support the constantly evolving preferences of modern students.

2.4 Syllabus vs. Learning Management System vs. Instructor Website

With the rise of digital education tools, the role of the syllabus has evolved alongside learning management systems (LMS) and instructor websites. Kim and Ekachai (2020) found that students valued the accessibility and interactivity of digital syllabus formats integrated with LMS platforms. Similarly, Middleton and Curwood (2020)

highlighted how online resources, such as instructor websites, can complement a syllabus by providing real-time dynamic updates and multimedia elements. Kerrigan and Bifulco (2023) extended this notion by exploring the use of video-enhanced syllabi, which actively engage students and offer a more personalized way to present course expectations. These comparisons highlight a growing need to harmonize syllabus design with new technological innovations.

2.5 UDL Syllabus

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles call for creating syllabi that accommodate diverse learning needs and enhance educational access equity. Richmond et al. (2018) proposed learner-centered syllabi that integrate UDL strategies, such as varied content formats and navigation that are clear and concise. Yesa et al. (2020) built on this sentiment by highlighting the importance of inclusive design and equal access to a course. A UDL approach ensures syllabi are effective for all students, regardless of their learning styles, socio-economic backgrounds, or language abilities.

2.6 Student Engagement, Agency, and Access

Engagement and access are critical components in the effectiveness of any syllabus. Yarosh (2021) argued that visually stimulating syllabi foster student engagement by making the syllabus more engaging and accessible. Similarly, Stowell et al. (2018) emphasized the role of syllabi in shaping perceptions of instructor approachability and perceived course value. Mills (2022) criticized the “contractual nature” of traditional syllabi, suggesting they be made more interactive and learner-focused, and emphasized using the syllabus to help students transition from passive recipients to active participants in their learning. This is further supported by Robb (2012) who argued for adopting a learner-centered syllabus (LCS) that promotes shared responsibility, clarity, and flexibility in course expectations and evaluation to foster active engagement and collaboration between instructors and students. These insights highlight the importance of designing a syllabus that prioritizes clarity and a sense of student empowerment.

2.7 Infographic Style

Infographic-style syllabi prioritize visual hierarchy, concise text, and appealing design to convey information effectively. Moosavian (2017) found that this style improves comprehension by reducing cognitive load and highlighting the key points of information. Overman et al. (2020) also noted that infographic-style design encourages deeper engagement, making it particularly effective for complex course information. These findings support the adoption of visual frameworks necessary for effective visual syllabus design.

2.8 Support For the Visual Syllabus

Empirical evidence highlights the benefits of visual syllabi in improving student engagement and comprehension. Yarosh (2021) observed significant increases in student satisfaction when using an infographic-style syllabus. Additionally, Overman et al. (2020) highlighted how such designs can aid information retention and accessibility. In a similar vein, Kerrigan and Bifulco (2023) found that incorporating video into the syllabus format improved students’ engagement and provided a more interactive learning experience. Together, these studies advocate for incorporating visual elements into syllabi to meet the needs of modern learners.

2.9 Initial Impression Formation

The design and content of a syllabus significantly influence students’ impressions of their instructors. Nusbaum et al. (2021) observed that visually engaging syllabi fostered perceptions of instructor confidence and professionalism, which can set a positive tone for the class. Similarly, Stowell et al. (2018) emphasized the role of well-structured syllabi in signaling the instructor’s competence and attention to student needs. These studies suggest that the syllabus is not merely an informational tool but a critical document for impression management in educational settings.

Kaur (2021) observed that infographic-style syllabi enhanced perceptions of instructor creativity and organizational skills. Meanwhile, Jenkins et al. (2014) noted that detailed syllabi that clearly explain expectations and policies positively affect the perception of instructor effectiveness. These findings underscore the importance of thoughtful syllabus design in establishing credibility and fostering student-instructor rapport.

2.10 Course-taking Intentions

The format and presentation of a syllabus can influence students’ decisions about whether to enroll in a course. Kim and Ekachai (2020) demonstrated that dynamic syllabi encourage students’ willingness to participate in a course. Overman et al. (2020) similarly reported that visually enhanced syllabi improved students’ understanding of course materials and relevance, potentially boosting enrollment and retention rates. These studies highlight how

a new, modern syllabus design can act as a recruitment tool, motivating students in their academic journeys.

2.11 Education 4.0

Education 4.0 emphasizes integrating technology and learner-centered approaches to meet the needs of contemporary digital-native students and to help develop 21st-century skills (Himmetoglu et al., 2024). It reflects the transformation of education to meet the demands of a constantly changing interconnected world driven by new technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data. The key features of Education 4.0 are a learner-centered approach, information technology, collaborative and experiential learning, flexibility and accessibility, and student empowerment (Himmetoglu et al., 2024).

Himmetoglu et al. (2024) argued that visual and interactive syllabi align with the principles of Education 4.0 by leveraging current technology to enhance engagement and accessibility. Richmond et al. (2018) also highlighted the role of a visual syllabus in enhancing self-directed learning, which is a key component of Education 4.0. This shift in education advocates for reimagining traditional syllabi for technological advancements and changing student expectations.

3. The Study

This study explored the impact of syllabus design on university students' engagement, comprehension, and initial impressions of instructors. Specifically, it investigated students' perceptions and responses to a visual syllabus format. The research aimed to determine whether a visually enhanced syllabus can offer a more effective alternative to conventional syllabi regarding student engagement and understanding of course expectations.

3.1 Purpose and Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to assess whether or not students found a visual syllabus engaging and effective in understanding course expectations and requirements. Additionally, the study aimed to evaluate whether the syllabus presentation influenced students' first impressions of the instructor, an often-overlooked aspect of syllabus design.

3.2 Research Context

The study was conducted at two universities in Japan, reflecting multicultural and multilingual learning environments. This context was particularly relevant, as students at these institutions engage with English as a second or foreign language (EFL), highlighting the potential for visual design to enhance comprehension and reduce cognitive load for non-native English speakers.

3.3 Significance

This research addressed a gap in the literature regarding how visual elements in syllabus design affect the engagement and perception of university EFL students; previous studies had primarily focused on K-12 EFL students. While traditional syllabi remain widely used for their comprehensiveness, they may not align with the preferences and learning styles of 21st-century students, who are accustomed to consuming information through visually dynamic media. By observing students' perceptions of a new format, the study provided valuable insights for educators seeking to modernize their teaching materials and foster a more engaging learning experience from the outset of a course.

3.4 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Do students find a visually stimulating syllabus engaging and accessible?
- 2) How does the syllabus format influence students' initial impressions of their instructor?
- 3) What specific elements of a syllabus contribute most to student satisfaction and perceived effectiveness?

4. Overview of Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. Surveys were administered to gather measurable data on students' preferences, engagement levels, and perceptions of the visual syllabus format. Combining these methods ensured a holistic understanding of the impact of syllabus design on student engagement and impressions.

4.1 Methodology

This study examined university students' impressions of a visually stimulating syllabus format, contrasting it conceptually with the traditional text-based syllabus. The study did not utilize a traditional syllabus for direct comparison. Instead, it focused exclusively on the impact of the visual syllabus to assess its effectiveness and

appeal. A mixed-methods approach was used to comprehensively understand student responses, integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This approach enabled a richer exploration of the participants' perceptions, highlighting key themes and trends. The methodology section details the participants, the instruments used for data collection, the procedural steps taken during the study, and the strategies used for analyzing the gathered data.

4.2 Visual Syllabus Design

The syllabus was organized using a six-block visual framework on the first page, with each block presenting specific and relevant course information. This design aligns with cognitive load theory, which emphasizes breaking down information into manageable segments to improve comprehension and retention (Sweller, 2011; Liu, 2024). The six blocks featured concise, visually appealing content, using blocks and headings to delineate sections such as course objectives, grading policies, and assignments. The six blocks consisted of the following: (1) the professor's name and the name of the class, (2) the class description, including goals and expectations, (3) office hours, the professor's email, and the name of the textbook, (4) the semester schedule, including content, assignments, and examinations, (5) class scoring, and (6) the absence and makeup class policy.

The second page included an example of a professional email template tailored for university-level communication designed to enhance students' academic skills. The email sample provided guidance on proper etiquette, structure, and tone, giving students practical guidance on writing to their professors and peers.

4.3 Survey Distribution

To collect feedback, a QR code was prominently displayed on the second page of the syllabus, allowing students to scan and access the survey directly using their smartphones. This method ensured convenience and boosted response rates by allowing students to complete the survey while referring to the syllabus. The survey comprised ten items, including:

- 1) Eight Likert-scale questions (e.g., "The syllabus gave me a positive impression of the instructor," "I would like to use this kind of syllabus in other classes," "The syllabus was confusing," "I prefer a traditional syllabus").
- 2) Two open-ended questions designed to capture qualitative feedback and explore students' thoughts in greater depth.

4.4 Data Collection and Incentives

Students were informed that participation in the survey was entirely voluntary. To incentivize responses, those who completed the survey were awarded one bonus point on one of their exams, ensuring ethical encouragement while maintaining voluntary participation.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel to create descriptive statistics and visual summaries. Likert-scale data were averaged and analyzed for trends, while open-ended responses were categorized to identify common feedback themes. The results provided a comprehensive view of students' preferences and perceptions of the visual syllabus.

4.6 Participants

The study involved 168 undergraduate students of mixed genders enrolled in a variety of EFL courses at two universities in Japan. These students' majors represented a diverse cross-section of academic disciplines, ensuring a broad range of perspectives on syllabus preferences. Participants were drawn from first- through third-year cohorts, with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years of age. All participants had English proficiency levels corresponding to CEFR A2-B1, reflecting an intermediate level of understanding sufficient to engage with the syllabus content in English. Survey questions were provided in English and Japanese to ensure that students understood the content of the questions.

4.7 Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants were selected based on their enrollment in specific courses where the visual syllabus was implemented. To minimize potential biases, all students in these courses received the same visual syllabus, regardless of their academic backgrounds or personal preferences. The courses were chosen to represent a range of class sizes, subject matter, and instructor styles, further enhancing the diversity of the sample.

4.8 Syllabus Distribution and Customization

The visual syllabus distributed to participants was standardized to ensure consistency across courses. Researchers were permitted to modify only essential course-specific details, such as the instructor's name, contact information, schedules, and assignments, while maintaining the overall design and format. All researchers used a grayscale

format for the syllabus. This approach ensured that the content and structure of the syllabus remained consistent across different settings, allowing for a more reliable comparison of students' reactions and preferences.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process, and no personally identifiable information was collected. There was no penalty for not completing the survey.

5. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively understand university students' perceptions of a visually stimulating syllabus format. The study focused solely on the visual syllabus to explore its impact on student engagement rather than comparing the two different syllabus styles. The mixed-methods design was chosen to capture measurable trends (via surveys) and deeper insights into student experiences (via open-ended questions), ensuring a nuanced analysis of their perceptions and responses.

5.1 Type of Research Design

The study utilized a quasi-experimental design to explore students' reactions to a visually enhanced syllabus format in a natural classroom setting. Although students were not exposed to multiple syllabus formats, the research design aimed to control for external variables by ensuring that all students received consistent visual formats. This approach enabled a focused examination of student engagement and their perceptions of course expectations and the instructor, emphasizing the unique impact of the visual syllabus.

5.2 Variables

- 1) Independent Variable: The primary independent variable in this study was the syllabus format.
- 2) Dependent Variables: The dependent variables included student engagement, clarity of course expectations, and first impressions of the instructor, as measured through survey responses and qualitative feedback from the open-ended questions.

5.3 Data Collection Method

The study employed one primary data collection method. A structured survey, distributed via a QR code on the syllabus, was used to gather data on student preferences, perceptions, and impressions. The survey consisted of 10 items: eight Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. This combination allowed for both statistical analysis and the capture of qualitative feedback.

5.4 Sampling Method

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in various courses at two universities in Japan. These students were from different backgrounds and majors, ensuring a diverse sample. All students in the selected courses received the same syllabus, either in a paper or digital format, with no prior explanation of the study's purpose to minimize bias.

5.5 Data Analysis

Data from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the frequency and trends in student responses. From the Google Forms survey, students were able to share their opinions privately regarding the visual syllabus format. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using the visualizations in pie-chart and graph form provided by Google Forms.

6. Procedure

The study was conducted at two universities in Japan, involving a total of 168 undergraduate students. The procedure consisted of the following steps:

6.1 Preparation

Prior to the study, a visually enhanced syllabus was prepared using a six-block visual design to replace the traditional syllabus design. This visual syllabus included clearly defined sections for course objectives, grading policies, and schedules, along with a professional email template to guide students in composing professional emails in English. To ensure accessibility, a survey was developed using Google Forms with questions in both English and Japanese, with a QR code embedded within the visual syllabus to facilitate easy access for all participants.

6.2 Participant Recruitment

Participants were students enrolled in selected undergraduate English-language courses. Professors introduced the study during class, informing students that participation was voluntary and assuring them of anonymity and confidentiality.

6.3 Implementation

On the first day of the semester:

- 1) The visual syllabus was distributed to students during their class sessions.
- 2) Students were given 20 minutes to review the syllabus independently, without any prior explanation about its design.
- 3) After reviewing the syllabus, students were instructed to scan the QR code to complete the survey on their smartphones.

6.4 Data Collection

The survey consisted of 10 items, including eight Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. Students responded to the following questions:

Table 1. The survey

Question	Likert	Open-ended
Comment on your initial impressions about the visual syllabus. (Japanese or English OK)		O
このシラバスの最初の印象を教えてください		
The syllabus was easy to understand.	O	
新しいシラバスの書き方によって内容の理解がしやすくなる		
I prefer a traditional syllabus.	O	
文字だけのシラバスのほうが良いと思う		
This will be useful to me during the semester.	O	
このシラバスによって、今学期の自分の成長度合いを知るのがより楽になると思う		
If not, why?		O
そう思わない場合は理由を書いてください		
I was able to understand the class requirements easily.	O	
このシラバスによって、授業内容はより分かりやすくなった（以前の文字だけのものに比べて）		
The visual syllabus made me feel better about doing well in the class.	O	
このシラバスによって授業により積極的に参加する意欲がわいた		
This syllabus gave me a positive image of the professor.	O	
このシラバスからわかる先生の印象は良いものだ		
I would like to use this kind of syllabus in other classes.	O	
このようなシラバスをほかの授業でも期待する		
The visual syllabus was confusing.	O	
この新しいシラバスはわかりにくい		

Responses to the Likert scale question ranged from “1” (Strongly Disagree) to “5” (Strongly Agree). Responses were automatically recorded in a secure digital database in Google Forms. The data file and responses were shared only among members of the research team.

6.5 Post-Study Actions

Survey responses were exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis. To highlight trends, descriptive statistics (e.g., means, percentages) and visual summaries (e.g., pie charts) were created to highlight trends. Open-ended responses were analyzed to identify recurrent themes in student feedback.

7. Findings

This section presents the results of the study, including quantitative analysis of survey responses and qualitative insights from student comments. The findings are organized to address the research questions, focusing on student engagement, clarity of course expectations, and first impressions of the instructor based on the syllabus format.

7.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data from the survey revealed clear trends in student preferences and perceptions regarding the

visually enhanced syllabus.

7.1.1 Overall Preference for the Visual Syllabus

Students expressed a strong preference for the new syllabus format, as indicated by the low average score of 2.005 out of 5 on the item assessing preference for traditional syllabi. Additionally, the question that asked “I would like to use this syllabus in other classes” received high ratings, with 156 out of 168, or 92.8%, of students giving a rating of “4” or “5”, that is, “Agree” or “Strongly Agree,” indicating a strong preference for the visual syllabus.

The most common themes driving engagement were readability, ease of use, and usefulness. For example, Question 2 (“*The syllabus was easy to understand*”) received an average score of 4.380, highlighting the clarity of the visual format. For question 4 (“*This will be useful to me during the semester*”), students gave an average Likert score of 4.297, indicating their positive perception of the visual syllabus’s usefulness.

7.1.2 Clarity of Course Expectations

Regarding clarity, the majority of students (over 90%) indicated that the visual syllabus made it easier to understand course expectations by selecting “4” or “5” on question 6 (“*I was able to understand the class requirements easily.*”). These results suggest that using structured visual elements significantly reduced confusion and enhanced comprehension of course expectations.

7.1.3 First Impressions of the Instructor

The visual syllabus positively influenced students’ first impressions of the instructor. The item “*The syllabus gave me a positive impression of the instructor*” (question 8) received an average Likert score of 4.601, with 95.4% of students selecting “4” or “5.” This suggests that a well-designed syllabus can positively impact the perceived approachability and professionalism of the instructor. This coincides with the findings of Kaur (2021) and Jenkins et al. (2014), which showed that a well-designed syllabus enhanced students’ perceptions of instructors’ creativity, organization, and effectiveness.

7.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data from the two open-ended survey questions provided more profound insights into students’ experiences with the visual syllabus. Three primary themes emerged from the analysis: comprehensibility, readability, and visual appeal.

7.2.1 Visual Appeal and Accessibility

Students frequently highlighted the visual appeal of the syllabus, citing its readability and ease of comprehension. Nineteen respondents commented “*見やすい*” (*Easy to read*), while an additional 51 students commented “*分かりやすい*” (*Easy to understand*). In addition, one respondent commented, “*It’s easy to understand for me because it’s explained in simple words.*” These comments highlight the syllabus’s readability and effectiveness in conveying essential information.

7.2.2 Practicality of the Email Template

Students highly praised the inclusion of a professional email template on the second page. Many participants noted that this feature provided practical guidance for academic communication. One respondent stated, “*裏面にて英語でのメール送信のフォーマットを教えていただけただけののありがたいと思いました*” (*I was grateful that on the back of the package [syllabus] they provided the format for sending emails in English.*) Another student wrote, “*It was my first time to know how to write a proper email.*”

7.2.3 Preferences for Visual Over Traditional Formats

Many respondents explicitly compared the visual syllabus to traditional formats, with comments such as “*I prefer this style because it is easier to understand than before*” and “*Not too much text. Easy to read.*” Negative feedback was minimal but included remarks such as “*英語で書いてあって理解しづらそうだな*” (*It’s written in English, so it looks like it’ll be hard to understand*) and “*Not very clear.*” In total, only 12 of 168 students (7.14%) selected “4” or “5” on the last item of the survey, “*The visual syllabus was confusing.*” Both the positive and negative comments above demonstrate that the majority of respondents preferred the visual syllabus over a traditional, text-based syllabus.

7.3 Summary of Findings

The findings indicate a strong preference for the visually enhanced syllabus over the traditional format, particularly in terms of engagement, clarity, and the positive impression it created of the instructor. The combination of visual design elements and practical features, such as the email template, contributed to an overall favorable response from students. These results highlight the potential for innovative syllabus design to enhance student learning

experiences and establish a positive tone for the course.

7.4 Limitations

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into students' perceptions of syllabus design, several limitations should be noted. These limitations may affect the generalizability of the results and highlight areas for future research.

7.4.1 Participant Sample

The sample size of 168 undergraduate students, while sufficient for initial analysis, was limited to two universities in Japan. As such, the results may not fully represent the broader population of university students, particularly those in different cultural, linguistic, or educational contexts. Future studies should consider expanding the participant pool to include diverse geographic and institutional settings.

7.4.2 Lack of Random Assignment

The study utilized a quasi-experimental design in which students were not randomly assigned to receive the traditional or visual syllabus. Instead, all participants received the visual syllabus. This design choice, while practical, may have introduced selection bias and limited the ability to compare the two formats directly.

7.4.3 Reliance on Self-Reported Data

The data were exclusively self-reported through surveys, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability, acquiescence, or misinterpretation of questions. While using both Likert-scale and open-ended questions provided a degree of triangulation, the subjective nature of the responses should be considered when interpreting the results.

7.4.4 Limited Scope of Syllabus Formats

The study focused exclusively on one version of a visually enhanced syllabus. Variations in design elements (e.g., color schemes, font choices, or additional multimedia) were not explored.

7.4.5 Timing of Data Collection

All data were collected on the first day of the semester, immediately after students viewed the syllabus with an introduction by their instructors. While this approach captured initial impressions, it did not account for the long-term effects of syllabus design on student engagement, retention of course information, or academic performance throughout or at the end of the semester.

7.4.6 Language Considerations

Although the study provided an English syllabus to students with CEFR A2-B1 proficiency levels, language barriers may have influenced the results. Non-native speakers might have found some aspects of the syllabus more or less accessible, potentially skewing perceptions of clarity.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

Addressing these limitations presents opportunities for further study. Future research could:

- 1) Include a larger, more diverse sample across multiple countries and academic disciplines.
- 2) Experiment with additional variations on visual syllabus design, including fully digital or multimedia formats.
- 3) Measure the long-term impact of syllabus design on student performance and engagement.
- 4) Incorporate objective measures, such as eye-tracking or comprehension tests, to complement self-reported data.
- 5) Include both first and second-language versions of the visual syllabus to improve comprehension in EFL contexts.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

In alignment with the work of Kaur (2021), Himmetoglu et al. (2024), and Jenkins et al. (2014), the results of this study underscore the significant impact of syllabus design on students' engagement and comprehension and their initial impressions of instructors. By examining students' perceptions of a visually enhanced syllabus, this research provides valuable insights into how visual elements affect the learning experience. However, it is important to note that more research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of visual syllabi at the university level, as most existing studies have focused on K-12 students.

9.1 Enhanced Engagement Through Visual Design

The findings revealed a clear preference for the visually enhanced syllabus, with students reporting higher levels of engagement compared to traditional syllabi. This supports research emphasizing the role of visual appeal in

capturing the attention of digital-native students (e.g., Kaur, 2021; Yarosh, 2021). The use of segmented blocks, color coding, and icons likely contributed to reducing cognitive load, as suggested by Sweller (2011) and Liu (2024) in their discussions of cognitive load theory. Students' feedback supports the idea that breaking down information into smaller, visually distinct units enhances usability and accessibility.

9.2 Clarity and Accessibility of Course Expectations

The visual syllabus was significantly perceived as clear, particularly in presenting essential course information. This finding corroborates Overman et al. (2020), who found that visually rich syllabi improve information retention and reduce confusion. One respondent commented: *"I think that new syllabus is good for students' development."* The inclusion of a professional email template also received praise, highlighting the importance of integrating practical, skill-based components into syllabus design. For non-native English speakers, the visual elements likely served as scaffolding, facilitating comprehension and accessibility, as observed in previous studies in multilingual learning environments (Himmetoglu et al., 2024).

9.3 Positive Impressions of Instructors

Students' first impressions of their instructors were notably favorable when the visual syllabus was used. This supports findings from Nusbaum et al. (2020), who demonstrated that syllabus design can influence perceptions of instructor approachability and professionalism. The present study's results suggest that a well-designed syllabus sets a positive tone for the course, potentially enhancing student-instructor rapport.

9.4 Implications for Syllabus Design

The results underscore the potential of visually enhanced syllabi to improve the overall student experience. By addressing common critical points—such as difficulty navigating dense text and understanding complex policies—visual syllabi can make course materials more approachable and effective. This study's findings are consistent with those of Kerrigan and Bifulco (2023), who emphasized that integrating multimedia formats, including video syllabi, can enhance communication, improve engagement, and offer students a more engaging introduction to course expectations. Moreover, integrating tools like QR codes to streamline access to essential information reflects an innovative use of technology that aligns with modern educational practices.

10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of incorporating visual design principles into syllabus development. By enhancing engagement, improving clarity, and fostering positive impressions of instructors, visually enhanced syllabi represent a practical and effective tool for modern educators. Visual syllabi clarify expectations, encourage early participation, and remove barriers to access. As universities continue to adapt to the needs of 21st-century learners, adopting innovative approaches to syllabus design can play a pivotal role in creating inclusive and engaging learning environments. By leveraging technology for creative and student-centered design, instructors can build improved connections with students and support the needs of diverse student populations.

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Authors' contributions

Prof. HERNANDEZ was responsible for study design and revising. Prof. HERNANDEZ, Prof. PRIEST, and Prof. GRANT were responsible for data collection. Prof. HERNANDEZ drafted the manuscript and Prof. PRIEST and Prof. GRANT revised it. Prof. PRIEST wrote the literature review while Prof. GRANT proofread it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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No additional data are available.

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