

## DESIGNING A LEARNER-CENTERED ESP COURSE FOR ADULTS AND INCORPORATING THE LEARNERS' AIMS INTO A SITUATIONAL-BASED SYLLABUS

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the organization of a six-week Conversational English ESP course design for the twenty-two adult administrative human resources staff working in the International Inlingua Language Learning Center in Istanbul. At the very start of this course, a thorough needs analysis taking into account the language needs of the learners based on the essentials put forth by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St.John (1998) established the core framework for the study and the findings from this analysis were used for the ESP course and syllabus design. Throughout my study, I always tried to tailor-make the course to suit the needs and wants of the learners and contribute to a positive learning experience since they were all in a non-native English speaking country. In the final phase of my study for the ESP course design in question, the choice of the right syllabus was a major decision in language teaching, and it was made as consciously and with as much information as possible. After due consideration, I decided on the Situational-Based Syllabus as the most appropriate syllabus from among the several distinct types of language teaching syllabi and prepared the course content for the Conversational English Class.*

**Key Words:** ESP, syllabus design, language needs, wants, decision-making, course content.

### Yetişkinler İçin Öğrenci Merkezli Özel Amaçlı İngilizce Kursunun Tasarımı ve Öğrenci Amaçlarının Durumsal İzleneye Dahil Edilmesi

#### Özet

*Bu çalışma, İstanbul Uluslararası Inlingua Dil Öğrenme Merkezi'nde görev yapan 22 kişilik yetişkin İnsan Kaynakları personeli için tasarlanmış altı hafta süreli İngilizce Konuşma ESP (Özel Amaçlı İngilizce) kursunun planlanması ile ilgidir. Bu kursun başında, esasları Hutchinson ve Waters (1987) ve Dudley-Evans ve St.John (1998) tarafından ortaya konulan kapsamlı bir Gereksinim Analizi uygulanmış ve bu çalışmanın bulguları tüm araştırmanın temel çerçevesini oluşturmuş olup, buradan elde edilen veriler gerek Özel Amaçlı İngilizce kursunun ve gerekse müfredatın tasarımında kullanılmıştır. Çalışmam boyunca, öğrencilerim İngilizce konuşulmayan bir ülkede olduklarından dolayı, kursu onların gereksinim ve beklentileri doğrultusunda düzenledim ve dil öğrenme için olumlu bir ortam oluşturmak için elimden geleni yaptım. Söz konusu ESP kurs tasarımının son safhasında, en önemli olay doğru müfredatın belirlenmesiydi ve bu tespitin hatasız yapılabilmesi için mevcut verilerin oldukça bilinçli kullanımı önemliydi. Detaylı bir değerlendirmeden sonra, tüm mevcut müfredat türleri arasından Durumsal İzlenme üzerinde karar kıldım ve İngilizce Konuşma Kursunu bu doğrultuda düzenledim.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** ESP, müfredat tasarımı, dil ihtiyaçlarını, istiyor, karar verme, ders içeriği.

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## Introduction

Nowadays, most Turkish ESP practitioners design a wide variety of ESP courses such as English for civil servants, for policemen, for insurance staff, for medical students, for legal staff, for nurses, for human resources personnel etc. Such ESP courses have started to be more prevalent in our rapidly developing country, especially after Turkey's application for full membership of the European Union in the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, Turkey has undergone a lot of changes in her national and foreign policy, international trade as well as economy and these transformations established the need for relevant and learner-centered ESP courses in our globalizing world.

It is for this reason that if the ESP instructors lack the basic knowledge and experience about how to design an effective course that will cover the specific language needs of their students, they are often faced with various complexities and problems. Due to this reason, many instances of ESP course design in our country are often ad-hoc and not entirely based on comprehensive needs analyses.

All ESP course designers should know that the job of an effective ESP course design includes:

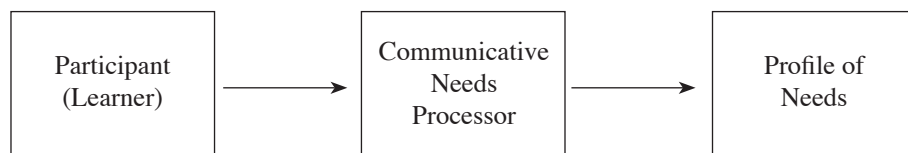
- (a) planning and designing an appropriate course suitable for the target ESP groups,
- (b) deciding on the practical type of syllabus that well meets the basic requirements of the ESP course participants.

## 1. Theoretical Background to ESP Course Design

The idea of focusing on learners' needs originated in the 1970s resulting from the interest in the design of language courses that could satisfy individual and social needs (Palacios Martinez, 1992:135). Its development evolved in association with the teaching of languages for specific purposes. In 1978, Munby proposed his "Communication Needs Processor" (CNP), a model for needs analysis (Figure-1) which was quite influential, and stated that the design of syllabuses for language courses could only take place after a preliminary work on the learners' needs.

In spite of such ESP diagrams designed by different practitioners, Munby's Communicative Needs Processor (1978) as seen in Figure-1 still keeps its values as it is considered contributory to ESP in many developmental ways (Jordan, 1997; Phan, 2005).

**Figure 1:** The Munby Model



The Communicative Needs Processor (CNP) is the heart of the model. The information that is received from the learner, the participant, is processed in the CNP in which there are a number of categories of which results provide us a needs – a description of what the learner will be able to do with the target language when the course is over.

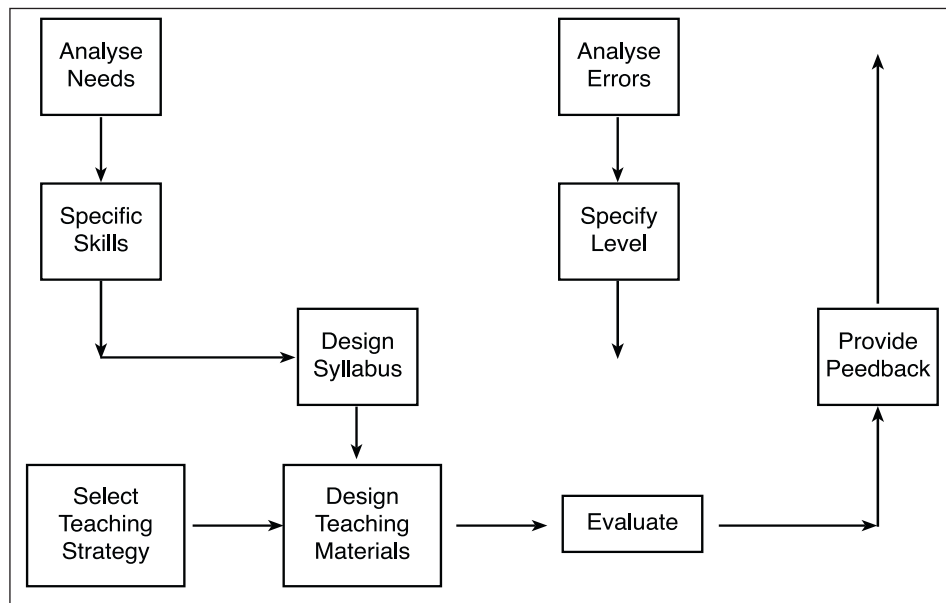
Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 54-63) assume that needs analysis is a complex process and should take into account the following points below:

- a) “*Target Needs*”, what learners need to do in order to learn – i.e. language learning.
- b) “*Subjective Needs*”, that is, their affective needs, such as their interests, wishes, expectations and preferences (Nunan, 1988)

We can gather information about learners’ needs through different media (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:58; Palacios Martinez, 1994:143) such as surveys, questionnaires, interviews, attitude scales, intelligence texts, language texts, job analysis, content analyses, statistical analyses, observation, data collection, or informal consultation with sponsors, learners and others.

Furthermore, needs analysis should not only be considered as a pre-stage for the design of language courses: in fact, it is an “on-going process” (White, 1998:91) and, as evaluation, it can be used to design, improve and implement language programs.

In ESP course design, if we accurately specify English language needs of a group of learners, we are easily able to determine the content of a language program that will meet specified needs (Munby, 1978). After this initial process for the specification of behavioral objectives, it is time to explore different syllabus elements such as functions, notions and lexis in a more detailed manner (Nunan, 1988). The commonly-used diagram prepared under the above considerations is the one in Figure- 1 below by Bell (1981:36). In the light of the theoretical knowledge above, Bell (1981:36) also prepared the commonly-used diagram in Figure-2 below.

**Figure 2:** ESP Language Teaching Syllabus Design

The steps on the left branch (Analyse Needs, Specify Skills) are the external requirements expected of the student. The steps on the right branch (Analyse Error, Specify Level) are the student's present competence and the bottom branch (Select Teaching Strategy, Design Teaching Materials, Evaluate) are to do with educational philosophy. The main emphasis in the present study is on the left branch: *Analyze Needs, Specify Skills, Design Syllabus*.

Dudley-Evans & St.John (1998:122) wrote that (a) needs analysis is often seen as being the corner stone of ESP for a very focused language course and that (b) the concept of learner needs is often interpreted in two ways although there are numerous ways to do it:

**1. Goal-oriented definition of needs:** what the learner *wants* to do with the language at the end of learning,

**2. Process-oriented definition of needs:** what the learner *needs* to do actually acquire the language.

Traditionally, the first interpretation was widely used and accepted. However, in today's globalised teaching and learning contexts, ESP courses try to meet both of the needs given above, and the emphasis is generally on the process-oriented approach for the purpose of aligning students' needs with their present working scenarios.

According to Wright (2001), if a course designer wishes to gather information about the content of any ESP course, he should use a comprehensive needs analysis as the first

step. He also states that an ESP practitioner can maximally benefit their learners only through a well-designed analysis of the learners' needs.

An ESP course designer should ask the following questions to himself prior to planning course design (Dudley-Evans and St.John, 1998:145) in order to balance out some of the institutional and learner expectations (Dudley-Evans and St.John, 1998):

1. Should the course be *intensive* or *extensive*?
2. Should the learners' performance be *assessed* or *non-assessed*?
3. Should the course deal with *immediate needs* or with *delayed needs*?
4. Should the role of the teacher be that of the *provider* of knowledge and activities, or should it be as *facilitator* of activities arising from learners expressed wants?
5. Should the course have a *broad* focus or *narrow* focus?
6. Should the course be *pre-study* or *pre-experience* or *run parallel* with the study or experience?
7. Should the materials be *common-core* or *specific* to learners study or work?
8. Should the group taking the course be *homogenous* or should it be *heterogeneous*?
9. Should the course design be *worked out by the language teacher* after consultation with the learners and institution, or should it be *subject to a process of negotiation* with the learners?

### 1.1. Conducting the Questionnaire

Dudley-Evans and St.John (1998:145) noted that only six of the questions in the questionnaire were directly related to the choice of the learners. It is for this reason that the learners were requested to answer only six of the nine questions in the questionnaire below with great care and attention. In analyzing course design issues, question item numbers (6), (8) and (9) proposed by Dudley-Evans and St.John (1998:145) were not included in the questionnaire since they are generally concerned with the institutional and researcher expectations.

For practical purposes and sake of easiness, it was conducted in Turkish.

1. Do you want to have an *intensive* or *extensive* course?
  - a. Intensive
  - b. Extensive
2. Do you think that your performance should be *assessed* or *non-assessed*?
  - a. Assessed
  - b. Non-assessed
3. In your opinion, which of the following *needs* should your teacher deal with?
  - a. Immediate
  - b. Delayed
4. Do you think that your teacher should play the role of a *provider* of knowledge and activities, a *facilitator* of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?
  - a. Provider
  - b. Facilitator

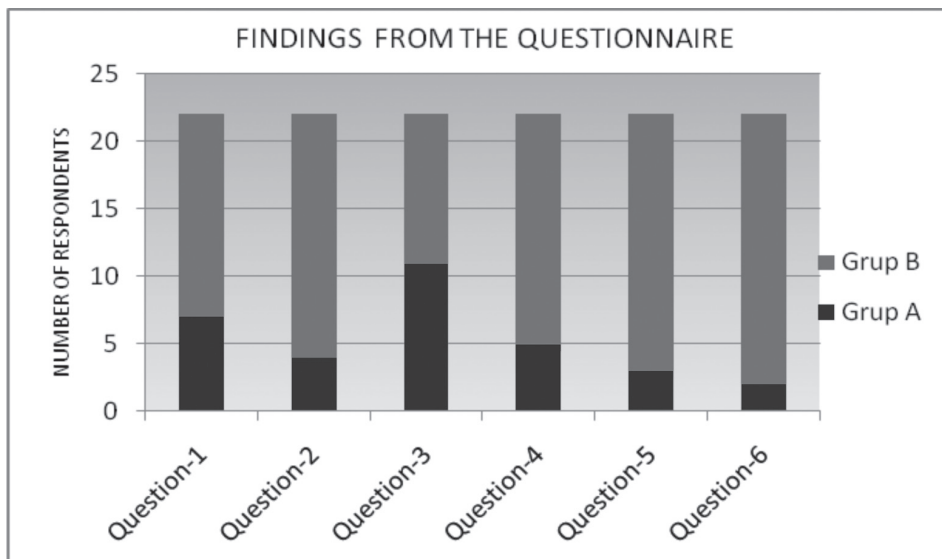
5. Does the course with a **broad focus** or **narrow focus** help you more?

- a. Broad                      b. Narrow

6. Should the materials be **specific** or **common-core** to learner study or work?

- a. Specific                    b. Common-core

## 1.2 Findings and Discussion on the Questionnaire



Right after the questionnaire, the key personnel were also consulted about the content of the ESP course that would guide in preparing the syllabus. Below are the findings from the questionnaire and a series of consultations:

### 1. The Duration of the Course

The learners preferred the course to be **extensive** in nature as the class duration was for 1 ½ hours twice a week over a 6-week duration (total of 18 hours).

### 2. Assessing the Course

It was not to be an assessed course. The learners were of the opinion that the **non-assessed** nature of the ESP course would help them to relax more during the classes as they could participate fully in the lessons without having the anxiety of failure.

### 3. The Aims of the Course

In this respect, both the **immediate** needs – what the students have at the time of the course- and **delayed** needs – the ones that will become significant later – were to be tackled equally.

#### 4. Teacher as a Provider or Facilitator?

The expectation of the learners was that they expected the teacher to lead what they are to do and learn. In other terms, they wished to have a teacher who would work with them as a *facilitator* of all the activities in the classroom and encourage the students to map out the type of activities they wanted to do (e.g. listen to explanation of the staff, discuss in small groups, present two sets of solutions to her problem and seek her comments on their suggestion).

#### 5. Broad or Narrow Focus

The course having a *narrow* focus was preferred as one of the key aims of the course was to concentrate on a few target communicative events. In this instance, the course focused on everyday conversations and oral communicative events usually practiced by the learners. This was seen as being relevant to the learners' language needs because the key topics that were outlined suited the course aims.

#### 6. Specific or Common-core Material

*The common core material* – material that uses carrier content which is either of a general academic nature or of a general professional nature – was the preference of the students. As the nature of the job of this group of learners involved using general English to deal with people at work, most of the materials were matched to the specific language expressions that they used at work. Therefore, I designed real-life situations such as role plays, conversations, and dialogues that matched at their workplaces.

### 2. The Place of Syllabus in ESP Course

Gathering and analyzing the language needs and aims of the learners through certain methods is not the end for organizing ESP course. We also need to decide on appropriate syllabus type(s) that match(es) the course in question. Hence, it is essential for ESP teachers to know well about the contents and details of syllabus in ESP course. There are several distinct types of language teaching syllabi, and each of these different types may be implemented in various teaching situations. The benefits of a well-prepared syllabus can be listed as below:

1. An effective syllabus conveys what the class will be like, what students will do and learn, as well as what they can expect of you.

2. It increases the likelihood of student's success in your class. It guides student learning in accordance with your expectations and demonstrates to students that you care about their learning.

3. A well-designed syllabus decreases the number of problems which arise in the course. Fewer misunderstandings arise when the rules of the game are explicitly stated in your syllabus.

4. It assists in your professional development. Writing and revising your syllabi provide you the reoccurring opportunity to reflect on both the form and purpose of your approach to teaching such questions as:

- a. Why do I select the content I do?
- b. Should I present the content in this order?
- c. Are these the best teaching strategies for this course?
- d. Is there a better way to evaluate achievement?

5. It tacitly records and transmits your teaching philosophy. The syllabus is a public document. When you are up for tenure or a promotion, your colleagues look to your syllabus for information about how you teach.

6. It provides pertinent information about your course to your colleagues and department. For example, colleagues who teach subsequent courses in your department will be able to make assumptions about what your students know and are able to do.

## **2.1. Types of Syllabi**

Below is mentioned six types of syllabi. The characteristics, differences, strengths, and weakness of individual syllabi are defined as follows. However, one should not consider that each type of syllabus is totally independent of the others. In other terms, for a given course, one type of syllabus may be dominant, while other types of content may be combined with it. To give an example, the distinction between skill-based and task-based syllabi may be minimal. In such cases, the distinguishing factor is often the way in which the instructional content is used in the actual teaching procedure.

### **1. A Structural (Formal) Syllabus**

A structural syllabus is a collection of the forms and grammatical structures of the language being taught such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, subordinate clauses, and so on.

### **2. A Notional/Functional Syllabus**

A notional/functional syllabus is a collection of the functions or of the notions such as informing, agreeing, apologizing, requesting, and so on.

### **3. A Situational Syllabus**

A situational syllabus is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. The primary purpose of a situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in the situations such as seeing the dentist, complaining to the landlord, buying a book at the book store, meeting a new student, and so on.

### **4. A Skill-Based Syllabus**

A skill-based syllabus is a collection of specific abilities that may play a part in using language. The primary purpose of skill-based instruction is to learn the specific language skills and to develop more general competence in the language.

### **5. A Task-Based Syllabus**

A task-based syllabus is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students want or need to perform with the language they are learning such as applying for a job, talking with a social worker, getting housing information over the telephone, and so on.



## **6. A Content-Based Syllabus**

The primary purpose of this syllabus is to teach some content or information using the language that the students are also learning. An example of content-based language teaching is a science class taught in the language the students need or want to learn. While doing this, we also make with linguistic adjustment to make the subject more comprehensible.

### **2.2. Choosing and Integrating Syllabi**

Although the six types of syllabus are commonly known and used, they cannot be considered totally apart from each other. Each one is used exclusively in actual teaching settings. In other terms, they are generally combined with each other, with one type as the organizing basis around which the others are arranged. The important thing that should be kept in mind is that the issue is a) which **types** to choose, not which **type**, and b) how to relate them to each other.

All types of syllabi fall into two categories as a) traditional and b) holistic. Traditional and holistic syllabuses reflect different views of language in addition to language learning and teaching. Both of the approaches to syllabus are quite valid, and most of the ESP courses reflect elements of both. The syllabus that we will use always determines which of the labels 'traditional' or 'holistic' to be employed.

#### **1. Traditional View of Syllabus**

Linguistic content is of primary importance in traditional syllabuses. The situational and thematic choices are secondary to linguistic content. To give an example, the audio-lingual method emphasizes a careful sequencing of grammatical structures, which are first presented and then repeated, with gradual memorization of the dialogue. This approach, highly-based on behaviorist psychology, sees language as a system of building blocks, and language acquisition as a process of habit formation, through imitation and repetition. This approach tends to ignore thematic content, and grammar and vocabulary are presented in isolated sentences.

Traditional syllabuses are suited to some types of learners. Thus, students can focus on a particular aspect of language by breaking the language down into bits and pieces. By doing so, they are no longer blurred by other problems of a lexical or phonological nature of the language being taught.

#### **2. Holistic View of Syllabus**

Those who criticize the traditional syllabus argue that it is not logical to break the language into bits and pieces. They put forth that the language should be experienced as a whole. This means that a holistic approach uses texts, i.e., whole pieces of language, rather than individual sentences. In this way, students are prepared for the language they will encounter outside the classroom. In scientific terms, we must progress from learning about the language (language usage) to considering how language works in a communicative sense (language use) which requires us to go beyond the sentence and look at longer stretches of language.

The holistic view has gained prominence in recent years. A holistic syllabus will front authentic and communicative texts, topics, and tasks. It places greater emphasis on meaningful communication from the learner's point of view, not isolated phonemes and morphemes.

Language errors are corrected by the teacher as the class while the students are on the task. Grammar is learned reactively, rather than pre-emptively. In short, the focus is on function and fluency. Learners experience the language outside the classroom. Form, accuracy, and analysis are not of primary importance.

A comparison of the traditional and holistic views of syllabus may be outlined as in Table-1 which is adapted from the book titled "The Learner-Centred Curriculum" written by David Nunan (1988).

**Table 1:** A Comparison of Traditional and Holistic Approaches

<b>TRADITIONAL VIEW</b>	<b>HOLISTIC VIEW</b>
Focuses on language as a sequence of grammatical patterns.	Focuses on communication rather than grammar.
Selects language items on a basis of complexity of linguistic criteria.	Selects on the basis of what language items the learner needs to know.
Tends to be more formal and bookish in language	Emphasizes genuine everyday language.
Aims to have students produce formally correct sentences.	Aims to have student communicate effectively in order to complete the task.
Emphasizes the reading and writing skills.	Gives speaking as much time as reading in order to complete task.
Tends to be teacher-centred in teaching.	Tends to be student-centred in teaching.
Focuses on the form of expression rather than the content.	Resembles the natural language learning process by concentrating on the content / meaning of the expression rather than the form.

### **3. Why a Situational-Based ESP Syllabus**

With this type of syllabus, the essential component of organization is a non-linguistic category, i.e. the situation. The underlying premise is that language is related to the situational contexts in which it occurs. The designer of a situational syllabus tries to predict those situations in which the learner will find him/herself, and applies these situations, for instance; seeing the dentist, going to the cinema and meeting a new student, as a basis for selecting and presenting language content. The content of language teaching is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. A situation

usually includes several participants who are involved in some activity in a particular setting. The language used in the situation comprises a number of functions combined into a plausible part of available discourse. The main principle of a situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in the situations.

In this syllabus, situational needs are important rather than grammatical units. The major organizing feature is a list of situations which reflects the way language and behavior are used everyday outside the classroom. Thus, by connecting structural theory to situations the learner is able to induce the meaning from a relevant context. One advantage of the situational approach is that motivation will be heightened since it is “learner- rather than subject-centered” (Wilkins.1976: 16).

**Table 2:** Course Content of a Situational-Based Syllabus

WEEK	KEY TOPICS	GRAMMAR FOCUS	HOURS
<b>WEEK - 1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION TO COURSE</b> a. Getting Started b. Making introductions	a. Verb tense review b. Pronouns	3 hrs
<b>WEEK - 2</b>	<b>GREETING PEOPLE</b> a. Initiating conversations b. Telephone etiquette	a. Question formation b. WH – question c. Preposition	3 hrs
<b>WEEK - 3</b>	<b>ASKING FOR INFORMATION</b> a. Seeking clarification b. Confirming information	a. Yes/no question b. Future and present tense c. Tag questions	3 hrs
<b>WEEK- 4</b>	<b>LISTENING TO INSTRUCTIONS/QUERIES</b> a. Understanding queries b. Responding to queries	a. Present continuous tense b. Vocabulary focus c. Tag questions	3 hrs
<b>WEEK- 5</b>	<b>USING POLITE EXPRESSIONS</b> a. Responding to others b. Having conversations c. Making brief presentations	a. Clauses b. Modals c. Verb tenses	3 hrs
<b>WEEK - 6</b>	<b>DISCUSSING ISSUES AND CONFIRMING DETAILS</b> a. Social communication b. Everyday office conversations c. Contributing ideas and suggestions	a. Modals b. Adjectives, adverbs c. Imperatives d. Conditional verbs e. Singular/plural	3 hrs

**Conclusion**

There are many essential points when considering a syllabus to be designed and implemented. The various syllabi touched upon in this investigation all present valuable

insights into creating a language program and course. Although the six types of syllabus were examined and defined here as if in isolated contexts, it is uncommon for one type of syllabus to be utilized fully in actual teaching settings. Syllabuses are frequently combined in more or less integrated ways with one type as the organizing starting point around which the others are arranged and connected. To put it another way, in arguing about syllabus choice and design, it should be kept in mind that the question is not which type to choose but which types and how to connect them with each other. Finally, and perhaps preferably, a hybrid syllabus needs to be constructed and designed due to pragmatic reasons. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987:51) state “it is wise to take an eclectic approach, taking what is useful from each theory and trusting also in the evidence of your own experience as a teacher”.

In closing, it is of great importance to note that no single type of syllabus is appropriate for all teaching settings. This is due to the fact that the needs and conditions of each setting are so characteristic and idiosyncratic that particular proposals for integration are not easily possible. The *possibility* and *practicality* aspects of a particular syllabus to be developed and implemented are of great significance while processing the issue. To put in more tangible terms, in making practical decisions about syllabus design, one must take into account all the potential factors that may affect the teachability of a specific syllabus. By beginning with an assessment and investigation over each syllabus type, keeping track of the choice and integration of the different types according to local needs, one may find a principled and practical solution to the problem of suitability and efficiency in syllabus design and implementation. The investigation on how subtly and carefully a syllabus can be designed and implemented opens a new horizon for future research.

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