

AN EVALUATION OF SYLLABUS DESIGN PRACTICES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: PRODUCT-ORIENTED AND PROCESS-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Syllabus design is a central component of English Language Teaching (ELT) as it shapes instructional practices, learning experiences, and assessment procedures. Over time, differing theoretical perspectives on language and learning have given rise to various syllabus models, among which product-oriented and process-oriented approaches remain prominent. This study evaluates syllabus design practices in ELT by examining how these two orientations are reflected in learning objectives, content organization, teaching-learning activities, teacher and learner roles, and assessment practices. Adopting a qualitative document analysis approach, the study analyzes selected English language syllabuses to identify dominant design principles and patterns of integration. The findings indicate a strong prevalence of product-oriented features, particularly in outcome specification and assessment, alongside selective incorporation of process-oriented elements in classroom activities. This imbalance highlights ongoing tensions between institutional demands for standardization and pedagogical efforts to promote communicative, learner-centered instruction. The study concludes that effective syllabus design requires a context-sensitive, integrated approach that aligns objectives, instructional processes, and assessment methods to support comprehensive language development.

Keywords: syllabus design, English language teaching, product-oriented syllabus, process-oriented syllabus

1. Introduction

The syllabus design holds an important role in the English Language Teaching since it transforms the theoretical perspectives of the language and learning into classroom instructions. According to Saleem and Khan (2025), “the historical processes of the development of ELT in Pakistan demonstrate an interaction of the political ideology, socioeconomic factors, and international pressure” (p. 954). A syllabus is a document that defines what should be taught, sequence in which a content is taught and the standards according to which the learning is assessed (Richards, 2001). As a result, syllabus design decisions have an immediate implication on teaching practices and outcomes of learners. In the past, the development of the language teaching methodology resulted in the corresponding changes of the syllabus. The early structural methods focused on grammatical correctness and sequential order and the later communicative methods focused on the use of language, interaction and student involvement (Wilkins, 1976). The following developments created two main orientations of syllabus design, namely, product-oriented and process-oriented syllabuses. The former is based on the predestined outcomes whereas the latter is on the process of learning itself.

Syllabus Design in English Language Teaching

A syllabus is widely described as a stipulation of what is to be taught and learnt in a certain course in ELT (Nunan, 1988). It is a convenient guideline which will help teachers in planning their lessons and give the learners a clear direction to follow and expectations.

Syllabus design refers to the process of making a choice over linguistic content, processing that content into manageable units and sequencing those units in a manner that has a pedagogical significance. White (1988) claims that the design of syllabus also indicates some assumptions regarding the nature of language and its acquisition process. In this respect, it is not a concrete or strictly technical practice but one that is highly subjected by theoretical and ideological standpoints. In this context, product-oriented and process-oriented syllabuses are opposite perspectives of language learning and teaching priorities.

Product-Oriented Syllabus Design

A product-oriented syllabus is organized around clearly defined learning outcomes that learners are expected to achieve by the end of a course. The content is selected and sequenced in advance, often in the form of grammatical structures, vocabulary items, or language functions (Wilkins, 1976). Product-oriented syllabuses are typically associated with structural syllabuses focusing on grammar, notional-functional syllabuses emphasizing communicative functions, and content-based syllabuses organized around subject matter. These syllabuses assume that language learning is a cumulative process in which mastery of discrete elements leads to overall proficiency (White, 1988).

Process-Oriented Syllabus Design

Process-oriented syllabuses prioritize the learning experience rather than fixed linguistic outcomes. Instead of specifying detailed content in advance, these syllabuses focus on tasks, activities, and interaction through which language development occurs (Breen, 1987). In this approach, language is viewed as something learners acquire through use rather than through the accumulation of predetermined forms. Learning objectives may evolve during the course in response to learner needs and classroom dynamics (Nunan, 2004). Key features include, emphasis on communication and meaning, learner-centered instruction, flexible content selection, and focus on tasks and negotiation of meaning.

“In fact, different types of syllabuses have emerged and been categorized according to their objectives and the way language is presented to learners. Almost all researchers in the field of second language pedagogy, as we shall see in the next sections, agree on the fact that there are two major types of syllabuses. However, the names attributed to these two types differ from one researcher to another. For example, while the two types have been called by White (1988) as ‘type A and type B syllabuses’, Wilkins (1976) has classified them as ‘synthetic and analytic syllabuses’. Also, the two types are known by other researchers, such as Nunan (1988), as product-oriented and process-oriented syllabuses.” (as cited in Benbellal, 2019, p. 122)

Research Objective

- To evaluate the use of product-oriented and process-oriented principles in English Language Teaching syllabus design and their implications for classroom practice and teacher education.

Research Question

- How are product-oriented and process-oriented principles reflected in ELT syllabus design, and what implications do they have for classroom practice and teacher education?

Comparative Evaluation

The contrast between product-oriented and process-oriented syllabuses reflects broader debates in ELT about the nature of language and learning. Product-oriented approaches emphasize control, structure, and measurable outcomes, whereas process-oriented approaches value flexibility, interaction, and learner agency. Rather than viewing these approaches as mutually exclusive, several scholars argue for a balanced or integrated approach to syllabus

design (Richards, 2001; Nunan, 2004). Such an approach allows for the specification of essential language content while also providing opportunities for meaningful communication and learner-driven learning.

Literature Review

Research on syllabus design in English Language Teaching (ELT) has consistently emphasized its central role in shaping instructional practices and learning outcomes. The literature reflects a gradual shift from rigid, content-driven models toward more flexible, learner-centered approaches, mirroring broader developments in applied linguistics and language pedagogy. According to White (1988), the design of syllabus indicates more profound ideological stances regarding the character of learning and language and learning, the distinction being between syllabuses that are product oriented and syllabuses that are process oriented. This has turned out to be a seminal idea in syllabus design literature.

The use of product-oriented syllabuses has been an issue of a great deal of discussion when applied to conventional language teaching techniques. These syllabuses define in advance the outcomes of learning and structure contents according to grammar structures, functions, or notions (Wilkins, 1976). Richards (2001) argues that this type of syllabuses are common especially in institutional contexts that emphasize standardisation, accountability and performance in examination.

While product-oriented syllabuses provide clarity and structure, researchers have questioned their effectiveness in promoting communicative competence. Nunan (1988) notes that an exclusive focus on predetermined linguistic outcomes may neglect learners' communicative needs and reduce opportunities for meaningful language use. Similarly, Long (2000) argues that language learned as isolated forms often fails to transfer to real-world communication. Despite these criticisms, product-oriented syllabuses remain influential due to their practicality and ease of assessment. Their continued use reflects institutional demands as well as teacher preferences for clearly defined objectives and content boundaries (Richards, 2001). Process orientated syllabuses arose as an expression of discontentment with the form based instruction and were largely inspired by the communicative language teaching. According to Breen (1987) the process syllabus is that syllabus that puts more emphasis on learning experiences, negotiation and interaction as opposed to predetermined content. Language development is viewed through the perspective that it is a process of emergence, determined by classroom talk and through interactions of the learners. Nunan (2004) goes further to explain that process-based syllabus is learner-centered and the objectives and content varies according to the needs and advancement of the learners. The process-oriented design is frequently linked to task-based language teaching as the major instructional unit offered, which is focused on meaning-oriented tasks (Ellis, 2003).

Nonetheless, researchers also admit practical issues of process-based syllabuses. According to White (1988), the lack of specifically defined content might bring confusion to the planning and evaluation. In addition, there is a possibility that teachers would find it difficult to balance between process-oriented ideals and institutional demands in exam-driven settings (Long, 2000). Recent literature suggests moving beyond rigid dichotomies between product and process orientations.

Richards (2001) advocates for a balanced approach that combines clearly defined learning outcomes with opportunities for communicative practice. Similarly, Nunan (2004) argues that effective syllabus design should integrate form-focused instruction within meaningful communicative contexts. Further, Saleem, Batool & Ijaz (2025) state "There is currently no official regulatory body to supervise how syllabi are arranged and used which has created a hole in accountability". This integrative perspective recognizes that language learning involves both the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and the development of communicative

ability. As such, contemporary syllabus design increasingly reflects hybrid models that draw on the strengths of both product-oriented and process-oriented approaches.

Analysis and Discussion

As part of analysis, it is shown that in most English language syllabuses, learning objectives are largely product-oriented. Goals are commonly constructed as measurable results, e.g. mastery of particular grammatical structures, vocabulary items or language abilities at the conclusion of the course. This is a rather conventional understanding of language learning as the collection of discontinuous linguistic knowledge. These outcome-based goals are clear and guide both the learners and the teachers. Nevertheless, they prefer linguistic accuracy to communicative effectiveness. Conversely, syllabuses which include process-related aspects are more general in that they focus on the emerging communicative competence and on interaction and strategic language use on the part of learners. The objectives are more flexible to implement in the classroom but can be imprecise in assessment. Syllabuses that are product-oriented are generally in a linear and hierarchical arrangement of the content. The sequence of linguistic items is complex to simple implying that language acquisition is gradual. This method provides a definite teaching channel but presupposes the same learning pace amongst students.

Process-oriented syllabuses, in their turn, demonstrate a less strict attitude to the choice of the content. Instead of giving detailed linguistic input, they base their instruction around tasks, theme, or communicative situations. The interaction and engagement of a learner with tasks are a dynamic perception of language learning, which results in the creation of content. This flexibility helps people to use the real language, but it also requires more planning and classroom time management abilities of teachers.

The discussion shows that the classroom roles are greatly affected by syllabus orientation. In product-based syllabuses, the teacher is placed as the main source of knowledge who must provide preset information. The learners, on their part, should reproduce and internalise linguistic forms correctly. On the contrary, process oriented syllabuses give teachers a facilitative role. Teachers assist, control and guide learners when they engage in communicative activities. Learners are considered as active agents who play their roles within the process of learning by interacting, collaborating and negotiating meaning. Such transformation encourages the independence of learners but demands that the teachers have well-developed pedagogical and reflective abilities.

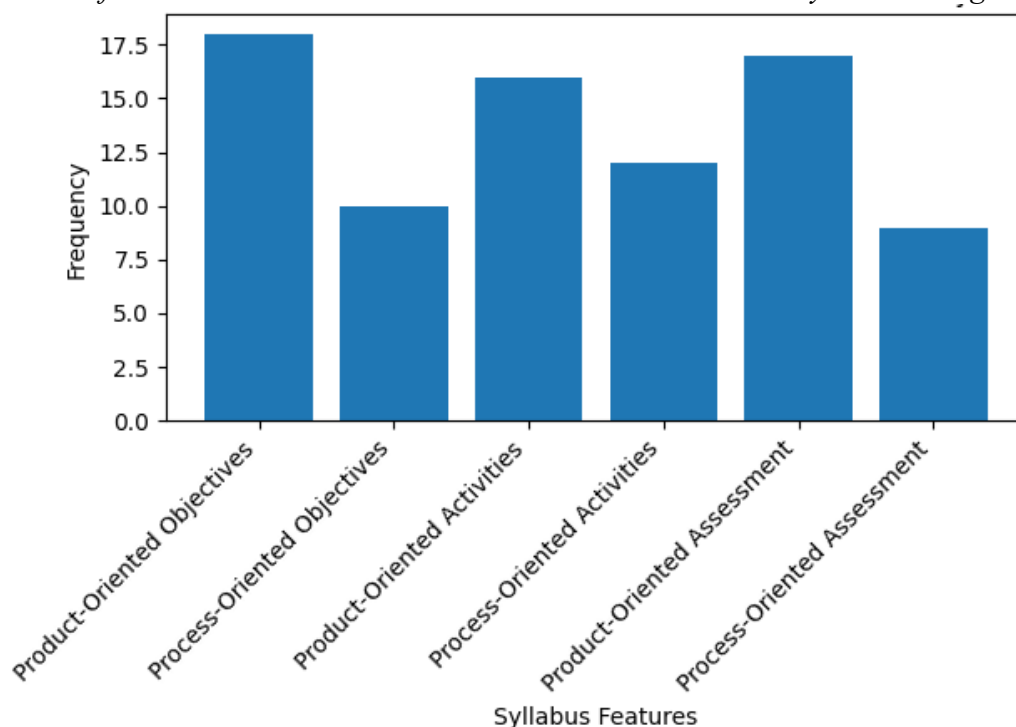
Instructional activities analysis indicates that there is a difference between the two approaches. Product oriented syllabuses put much emphasis on activities that are form-based like drills, controlled practice and written exercises that are aimed at maintaining certain items of language. These exercises help with precision but can restrict the use of language spontaneously. Process-based syllabuses put more emphasis on meaning-based activities such as role plays, problem solving activities, group discussions and the project learning activities. These types of activities promote natural communication and language in a context. Nevertheless, they can lead to the lack of attention to linguistic form without proper planning, which can have the impact on the accuracy.

There are also dissimilarities in the assessment practices portraying the two syllabus orientations. The product-based syllabuses are based on the standardized tests, quizzes, and examinations, which are used to assess the knowledge of the learners on the already prepared material. These evaluation strategies are effective and objective yet might not be able to reflect communicative aptitude. Process-oriented syllabuses prefer alternative form of assessment like portfolios, self-assessment, peer assessment and performance-based tasks. These methods allow a more detailed view of the learner development, although, they are

both time-consuming and hard to standardize. The discussion indicates that assessment conformity is still a significant issue in a process-based syllabus implementation.

Figure 1

Distribution of Product-Oriented and Process-Oriented Features in Syllabus Design



The figure 1 shows that there is a strong product-oriented aspect that prevails in all major syllabus features. The maximum concentration of product-oriented features is observed in learning objectives and assessment practices, which means that the priority is given to the predetermined results, linguistic accuracy, and quantifiable achievement. This is in line with the conventional syllabus design approaches in traditional ELT setting where examination is a core element. Process-oriented features are, conversely, not as prevalent, especially at the assessment practices. Although there are process-oriented activities which include communicative work and interactive learning activities, they are not systematically incorporated in all the elements of the syllabus. This implies that the principles of process are usually integrated at the level of the activity as opposed to the level of the structure or evaluation of the syllabus design.

Of particular importance is the gap between the product and the process-oriented assessment practices. Evaluation is still quite product-based and is based on tests and examinations instead of the performance-based or formative evaluation systems. Such a discrepancy can restrict the power of the communicative and learner-centered teaching.

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from the qualitative document analysis of English language syllabuses. The findings are organized thematically to reflect how product-oriented and process-oriented principles are manifested across major syllabus components, including learning objectives, content organization, teaching-learning activities, teacher-learner roles, and assessment practices.

1. Predominance of Product-Oriented Learning Objectives

Among the most notable results, one can note the high level of the product-oriented learning outcomes. Most syllabuses clearly present the outcomes in terms of mastery of grammatical formations, vocabulary, and discrete language skills of the learners. The aims are usually

designed in terms of measurable verbs, e.g., identify, apply, use correctly, demonstrate knowledge, which implies the focus on observable performance. Although such objectives offer an understanding and make it easy to assess, they habitually idealize language learning as a product as opposed to a development process. Communicative competence, critical thinking, and strategic language use are listed fewer times and are not characterized in specific or tertiary meanings. This implies that outcome specification is still largely structured in a traditional and form-based methodology.

2. Linear and Pre-Determined Content Sequencing.

The discussion indicates that the organization of content in the majority of syllabuses is linear and hierarchical. Items of linguistic types are ordered according to their simplicity and complexity, and it is based on assumptions of slow and progressive acquisition of a language. The use of grammar as a basis of progression is very evident with structural content being the foundation of the syllabus. Though systematic coverage and instructional planning can be facilitated by this sequencing, it may permit only a small amount of flexibility to facilitate the diversity in learners or the ever-evolving needs and set-ups in classrooms. Process-based organization of content, e.g. units of themes or sequencing by task, is somewhat more ad hoc and integrated into a larger product-based framework than the defining element of the syllabus.

3. Selective Inclusion of Process-Oriented Teaching–Learning Activities

One of the major discoveries is selective process-oriented activities adoption. Communicative activities that are covered in many of the syllabuses include role plays, group discussions, presentations, and pair work. These activities are indicative of a knowledge of the principles of communicative language teaching and are geared towards facilitating interaction and fluent learning on the part of the learner. Nevertheless, the activities of this type are often placed as the peripheral tasks instead of the core of instruction. They are normally implemented following form-related teaching and do not necessarily relate to evaluation habits. This shows that process-oriented methodologies do not have complete control of the syllabus design on structural level, though they have an influence on classroom activities.

4. Learner Autonomy and Teacher-Centered

The analysis indicates that the role of teachers is directed towards the definition that is mostly directive. The teachers are supposed to present material, teach the language forms, and assess the performance of the learners according to the set standards. Roles of learners are rather passive and are related to practice, repetition, and correct production of language items. Elements that facilitate autonomy among the learners are process-oriented elements that promote learner choice, negotiated content or reflective learning and are not mentioned frequently. In their presence, they are generally defined though lacked clear procedures. This observation indicates that learner-centeredness is still more idealistic than practical in most syllabus documents.

5. Product-Oriented Dominance in Assessment Practices

Assessment emerges as the most product-oriented component of syllabus design. The majority of syllabuses rely on written tests, quizzes, examinations, and discrete-item assessments to evaluate learner progress. These methods prioritize accuracy and content coverage and align closely with product-oriented learning objectives. Alternative assessment practices associated with process-oriented learning—such as portfolios, peer assessment, self-assessment, and performance-based evaluation—are either absent or minimally emphasized. This imbalance indicates a misalignment between communicative classroom activities and assessment methods, potentially discouraging sustained engagement in process-oriented learning.

6. Emergence of Hybrid Syllabus Models

Though there is still prevalence of the features that are product-focused, the analysis reveals a new trend, which is the hybrid design of syllabus. Various syllabuses have tried to mix content specification in a structured way and communicative activities and interactive teaching strategies. This modernization manifests the modern influences of pedagogy and the institutional efforts to modernize the ELT processes. Nonetheless, integration between product and process orientations is most of the time lopsided. Product-oriented factors are more likely to control goals and evaluation whereas classroom activities are limited to process-oriented factors. This biased integration restricts the radical potential of process-based approaches.

Conclusion

Language offers the expanse of activities within society or other part of the universe (Saleem et al., 2019). The process of learning and teaching require a syllabus. The research aimed at assessing syllabus design practices within English Language Teaching by looking at product-focused and process-focused views. By means of qualitative document analysis, the study investigated the relationships between learning objectives, the organization of content, the teaching-learning activities, teacher-learner roles, and practices in terms of assessment as the manifestation of implicit theoretical orientations. The results prove that institutional needs, the tradition of pedagogy, and the development of new communicative strategies combined create a complex interrelation of syllabus development in ELT. The review demonstrates that there is an evident domination of product-oriented characteristics throughout the major syllabus contents, specifically, learning objectives, sequence of content and assessment practices. This hegemony demonstrates institutional interests like standardization, accountability and examination demands. Product-based syllabuses are structured, understandable and measurable, and these merits are also crucial under formal educating situations. Nevertheless, the paper also indicates the shortcomings of such methods, especially that they bring language acquisition down to the level of mastering individual linguistic units.

The consideration of process-related aspects, in particular, in teaching-learning activities, is the sign of increasing awareness of communicative and learner-centred pedagogy. These aspects allow interaction, relevant use of language and engagement by the learners which fits the modern concepts of language learning. However, the results indicate that process-based principles are usually added in inconsistent manners, which stays secondary to product-based models, which constrains the general pedagogical effect. The research concludes that the effective design of syllabus in ELT cannot be founded on the strict following of one orientation. Rather it must be context sensitive and integrative that merges the advantages of both product and process models. It is a process that needs to be integrated with objectives, instructional activity, and assessment practice along with sufficient teacher training and support of the institution.

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