THE FLEXIBLE SYLLABUS:
REASONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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This paper will concern itself with classroom management primarily. It is my thinking that what happens in the classroom influences students' learning habits in the long run and that they should be involved and engaged in the development of the syllabus and the curriculum for that matter. At first glance this would seem to make the teacher's job easier but that is decidedly not the case as any classroom teacher is well aware. But the payoff is well worth the effort.

In this paper I will address syllabus design only briefly in passing as it has already been amply addressed by many others For a look at syllabus design from a vocabulary acquisition point of view I highly recommend Nation's (2001) *Learning Vocabulary In Another Language*. Nation outlines a very organized plan for weaving the goals with the four main strands of teaching. I will explain these briefly so that the reader will be familiar as I use them as examples.

However, first I would like to clarify my basic position before I continue. There are many considerations for anyone who is learning another language and consequently sharing culture. Some sensitivity in this regard is in order. The differences are what is interesting and all due respect should be given. My own goal is that we share the values that each culture has and ultimately come up with a hybrid that has the best qualities of each. It should be noted that this process can have disorienting effects especially for the person just beginning to learn a second language and measures should be taken to make this as smooth a transition as possible.

In fact I think a smooth transition is paramount. The undertaking of acquiring a second language is necessarily a long range project, one that will transcend a one semester course, and the students will need to have techniques that they will be able to carry beyond the boundaries of any particular course, if they are to succeed. One of the first mis-matches between student and teacher is often the expectation that one can learn a language quickly, in a semester or two, rather than thinking of it as like learning to play an instrument, a project that will take some time and attention.

Nation's thematic strands are input, focus on form, output and fluency. According to Nation these aspects should be equally balanced in the daily lessons plans and syllabus. As I mentioned, Nation views the job of language learning from a vocabulary driven perspective. This particular view is quite practical from a number of angles, and is particularly germane to my purposes because it is quite accessible to students as an approach to language learning. Everyone understands that words, vocabulary, must be learned to learn a language. Nation brings considerable sophistication to this task while at the same time presenting clear, practical ways to achieve these goals.

Nation's observations about the psychological aspects are primarily concerned with how words are learned, remembered and utilized. His basic ideas are firmly based in studies involving cognitive processing.

Nation does not address classroom management extensively. Actually I have been in a class taught by Dr. Nation and so I understand why it wouldn't be an issue that he addresses. Dr. Nation has very good rapport with his students; his directness and accessibility create an atmosphere of common cause that involves all students in sharing their knowledge and examining ideas. This rapport forms a consensus for the goals of the class. The affective considerations of psychology are more salient here, rather than the cognitive more thoroughly discussed by Nation. I am convinced that Dr. Nation's rapport with the students is considered by him and I will suggest a process whereby a teacher may consider what their own position with a class might be. First a teacher needs to know who they are and how they function in the world. Then they can make the next step and connect with their students.

Ultimately in the classroom a consensus is reached between the students and the teacher. This consensus is built on mutual expectations and personalities. The personality of the teacher plays a significant part. The maxim 'Know Yourself' can be put to good use here. The best lesson plan and syllabus design can be most useful if a teacher knows who they are and how their style and their derived teaching style are put together. My thumbnail about teaching styles describes a strict, a kind, a charismatic and magnetically thoughtful teacher. These are just thumbnail sketches and are not meant to be definitive but I think it is important to note that the things I will describe are particular to the way that a teacher teaches. I don't think that the categories are fixed, or that anyone should try to fit themselves into any one of them arbitrarily. On the contrary, these are only meant to be helpful in the process of discovering what kind of teaching in the classroom works for me, or for you, as a teacher. Self-awareness will facilitate forming plans that will work in the classroom and I would not privilege any particular style. I note it only so that anyone

reading this can filter what I say through their particular experience with an eye to what might work, or not work for them.

So the consensus will occur. The teacher might be described as strict, or kind, or whatever, and that will form part of the consensus about what should and will go on in the classroom. By being aware of this consensus building process and taking charge of salient elements of it, the teacher can guide the students to the most effective ways for them to learn language. That the teacher has some expertise in what materials need to be attended to and their sequence is a given. The syllabus that I suggest is a tool to implement the plans that the teacher has and make the most efficient use of everyone's time and energy. There are many elements that I will describe that might be peculiar to my particular style. I ask the reader to consider these as illustrative and take what is workable. The essential aspect of a flexible syllabus is that it can facilitate the plan a teacher has made and adjust it to fit the particular circumstances as needed. The flexible syllabus is just a matter of building in options so that the requisite areas can be covered by different activities at different levels as needed. Perhaps the trickiest part is gauging when an activity is not working optimally, and what is the best change at that moment. I know of one instructor who gauges this by the sound of the hum of the activity and certainly that works well for him. I believe his concept is to catch activities just as they peak, just as the maximum amount the students can glean from the activity is attained, then they can maintain onward momentum, keeping energy for the other class activities.

A good teacher like a cat, always lands on her feet. This idea attaches itself to syllabus design very well. Entering a classroom is not something a wise teacher does without preparation and plans based on a needs analysis but experience teaches us that nothing is as constant as change. This can be change from one class year to the next or from one class to the next. The best lesson plans don't always work and don't always work the same for different classes. Students come from a variety of backgrounds even in the most uniform circumstances and the moods of the group dynamics changes with the particular time of year and according to the varying situations of the group and the individuals.

I will describe here in a step by step fashion, how I have responded to such surprises as differing expectations and styles within the classroom. I will also include some relevant observations from the some of the literature that examines these issues. I will describe what I mean by a flexible syllabus, one that can respond to a variety of situations so that a teacher is prepared for the unexpected and has something to offer as the need arises. This is not a total free flowing situation but rather a responsive one that includes the material to be learned, the teacher and the students. In addition there is always the

concern that the particular things that are taught mesh well with the overall curriculum that the student is involved in. A student should have as much responsibility for their learning as is possible but after all they have come here for the expertise that teachers can offer in the selection and progression of materials, for ways that they might most effectively learn what they need and want, and ways that they can become autonomous learners for the long project that they have begun.

I think that it will be helpful if I begin and follow the process of working up materials for a particular course. In this way my examination will outline the most salient issues and also offer practical steps in preparing a syllabus. In this way we can look at the issues as they come up and couple them with the implications of a flexible syllabus.

The first thing in preparing for a class is of course the needs analysis. Once a thorough needs analysis is done it's time to select and sequence the materials. Before the class begins much has been gleaned from the needs analysis. This is necessarily only an approximation of what to expect in the classroom. In my typical contexts a great deal of what I know about the students is conjecture based on previous students. Placement level testing is not always as discrete as one would hope and typically students will arrive with a range of backgrounds. These backgrounds represent not only a range of skills but also a range of expectations.

The expectations for the class belong not only to the teacher, but to the students, the institution, and the community at large. My focus here will be on the expectations of the students primarily. These are heavily influenced by the other factors but because I would like to primarily think about the students and teacher in the classrooms, I will necessarily give less attention to outside influences while I do want to acknowledge their importance.

The classrooms that students come from range from the most traditional settings where grammar-translation is the norm to various communicative approaches. The communicative approaches themselves actually represent a range of possibilities. The teacher's role is perhaps the most noticeable feature of the differences and there has been much discussion about teacher-fronted versus collaborative learning. Much of the debate centers on effectiveness. Teachers come to the classroom with a wealth of knowledge gained from a thorough base in the research that might vary from the students' expectations.

David Nunan (1988) describes three possible backgrounds that students could come from as Classical Humanist, which focuses on the materials to be taught; Reconstructionism, which focuses on the end products of what need to be taught, and Progressivism, which moves the students to solve problems such as they might encounter in the world which would need an outcome. There is some overlap of course and I suspect that a pure

instance of any of these would be hard to find.   Still, they are helpful to think about as we prepare and note what is successful for language learning with our students.   And they make a nice framework to discuss the possible expectations of the students.

Nunan then goes on to outline ways in which the curriculum can originate more from a practical teaching base rather than be directed from a theoretical base.   Language teaching, he asserts, has always had a number of directions that diverged from mainstream teaching.   Since his writing things have become ever more eclectic in language teaching as it responds to input from psychology, education, and computer modeling, just to mention the influences that come easily to mind.

All of these influences give tremendous power of innovation to the teacher.   But always when considering a flexible syllabus the teacher needs to keep in mind that it should be integrated as well with the overall curriculum and general style of learning that prevails in the students' immediate environment.   The students have ideas about their study. Many of these ideas come from the other teachers in their program.   Many others come from their family, friends and their culture generally.   So the jobs of the teacher as the teacher sees it may differ from some or all of the views held by the students.   This makes it worthwhile to look at some of the parts of the teacher's jobs.

Part of the job of the teacher is to lead the students to autonomy.   Learning a second language is a long range project like learning to play an instrument and therefore has a long time horizon.   For such a long time horizon the teacher has a relatively small window of opportunity to influence the student and help them develop the most effective methods of learning for each of them individually.

Another part of the job has to do with classroom dynamics.   There is a lot of information about how to institute collaborative methods into the classroom.   Some of these are quite specific to particular classroom settings.   Only a few, however, deal with the students' expectations.   I will describe some possibilities for integrating syllabi types to resolve some of the issues of differing expectations.

My impression is that nearly all of my students come from a learning environment that used something akin to a teacher-fronted approach.   They most likely would have had EFL in either junior high and/or high school and then, not infrequently, have attended a conversation school of some type.   So, students often have a fairly strong set of expectations based on their previous experiences.   Indications of more communicative methods are certainly beginning to surface in my classes although I expect that these methods are actually in the other university courses that they are taking.   A few students take to these innovations with enthusiasm but the dynamic of any particular class makes an undercur-

rent of thoughts that 'the teacher should just teach' fairly constant intimation. Into this mix of students there are also returnees from English language settings.

This group expectation couples with the range of student abilities to create a potential hazard for the teacher. Enter the classroom and be amazed as the lesson proceeds that half of the students are not engaged and the other half are perplexed. Where did this plan go wrong? And how could it be prepared for in ways that will maximize the learning for everyone involved? The obvious solution is pairing and sharing, the group work that is integral to the collaborative method. And, anywhere you find this method advocated you also find something that addresses ways of instituting it. When Students are often shy, setting the tone in the first class is very important. But, even when this is done, there is sometimes difficulty getting students actively engaged. A certain part of this is certainly cultural and to ignore this would be to undermine the enterprise. However, as usual in education we are faced a double edged dilemma: we need to respect students' views and understandings on the one hand and challenge them on the other.

My background and inclinations tend toward the more experiential, spontaneous and innovative methods. Recently I have gotten particularly enthusiastic about interactional activities. The background for these efforts can be found in the computer modeling, parallel processing models. But the notion of learning through active engagement, learning by doing, is actually not so recent. It seems common sense now that students who interact with materials and each other and the teacher are much more apt to assimilate and develop in the classroom.

I am also convinced that teaching should be very much learner centered. By learner centered I mean that it should focus on the learner's needs and desires and learners need to participate actively to get the most from any class. And of course for a language program to succeed in the long run, learner autonomy is a must.

If students are accustomed to teacher-fronted classes with clear breakdowns of the structural elements of language that are to be taught in the L1, then it is quite likely that the style of class participation in my expectations might differ from theirs. Indeed, I am finding more and more from my observations that metalanguage is often a hindrance and a discouragement for my students. I enjoy talking about grammar and the styles of writing using the meta-language, but I am not sure how helpful it is and how much it adds another layer of complexity into their already complicated task of attaining fluency and processing. I often find that my students might be able to write a compare/contrast essay but are at a loss to be able to describe it in detail using the meta-language that textbooks supply. Describing it in their own words, they are more able to do so. The subject of the

essays, and the logic of the particular writer, typically led the essay to a particular style of discourse. For the styles of discourse that are very formulaic, a model is often the most appropriate cue for students.

So, also, I am questioning how helpful, and how much of a hindrance, it might be to cleave too closely to a specifically grammar-based syllabus. Although students frequently ask to be taught more grammar I think the best approach comes with the usage and identifying the aspects of student papers that students can profit from assistance with. If a student has a specific problem, then that is the time to intervene and often the best possible grammar support.

Karl Krahnke (1987), assessing approaches to syllabus design, wonders why the issue of students' expectations is not more often addressed and so do I. He also acknowledges that purity of methods is not what happens in most classrooms and that an integrated syllabus, rather than a merely combined syllabus, is the most practical for the classroom. He also suggests a covert syllabus.

Looking at what happens in the classroom and aligning that with my notion that in that dynamic environment, the teacher needs to be prepared to meet students' needs and maintain their own perspective, I prefer the term flexible syllabus. This borrows from Krahnke's notions but I think in the end is a term that better describes being prepared for unexpected contingencies, and having the variety of initiatives to deal with them. In my classrooms at least, having too fixed an idea of what is going to happen doesn't seem to work as well as having a number of viable options.

First, I want to combine this notion of integrated, flexible syllabus with my idea that teachers can break down into steps any material so it can be accessible to the students at any level. Then I combine these ideas with Pienemann's teachability hypothesis: a cautionary note that teaching some things (Pienemann's research centers on grammar points) too early can sometimes block its eventual acquisition. Although this is a hypothesis, anecdotal examples address at least a perceived problem here. The teacher's, like the physician's, first maxim should be to do no harm.

The second maxim then might be to do as much possible to put the learner in charge of their own learning, to develop learner autonomy. This can be done with a curriculum and syllabus that is more learner centered and it is certainly an idea that surrounds autonomy and it is easy to see why this is so. Learner autonomy is tricky to develop in any context but especially in the second language classroom if the expectations are inverted.

The new expectations that I as a teacher would recommend are clear thinking. I think this is a driving element that will allow students to develop clear writing. There are some

factors that make a persuasive case for a form first approach and I am willing to entertain them with any student but in general I think most students benefit from an emphasis on ideas first.

At this point, it might be helpful to look at the notion of competences that Canale proposed: that there are four competences, grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic. These were devised to help come to grips with what teachers could set out to do in the ESL classroom.

Allow me a tangent at this point while I suggest, not altogether facetiously, an addition to Canales' competences. I propose the fifth competence might be the awareness of incongruencies. Granted this could be subsumed in discourse competence, or strategic competence, or, for that matter, in grammar or sociolinguistic competences, all of which are dealing with patterns of usage that need to be agreed upon as somehow internally consistent. This consistency is the background against which we judge what is going on in any particular discourse. Or I should say this consistency, and its contingent inconsistency is what we are looking for. In any particular piece of student writing we typically urge more and more specificity and what is finally interesting is a difference in the patterns. This holds true for grammar as well and we learn the rules in part so that we can break them, so that in a final moment we can express something just beyond the ability of the current state of our language to express. Discourse is even more heavily implicated in this examination of the inconsistent, the unusual. As an example, we find that discourse analysis of conversations typically shows a very strong desire of speakers to reconcile their points of view.

So that is why I nominate awareness of incongruence for a category of its own for its use as a grounding for students and a leg into the communicative skills, to relate to what is being said, to place it in context to the world. I think it is important in the teaching/ learning project to bring participants together for a common view of what is possible in this world and how to approach it. Humor is one way to appreciate incongruencies and certainly a part of what can bring this awareness about. It should be noted that this humor needs to be a shared appreciation of incongruency and teachers should avoid even the appearance of derision or sarcasm.

It might be assumed because I have discussed thus far on skills that I am inclining to a skills syllabus. However I still think there is a lot of value in a number of syllabus styles, so would like to expand to a novel design that I will call a flexible syllabus.

The novel design I have in mind, this flexible syllabus, in keeping with the idea of a covert syllabus that should be most acceptable to the broadest group of students, especially

those from a structure syllabus background, might be called a structural-situational-skills/based-task/based-content/based syllabus, which sounds a little like a many headed dragon. But, if you will indulge me for a little, I'd like to examine the hypothetical plausibility of such a creature.

J. C. Richards (2001) very carefully outlines the types of syllabi and spends some time with the appropriate levels, how to determine them and what would be best at each stage. I agree with these blocks, but, like most teachers, a lot of evaluation has to go on in the classroom at the time of the class. So, predetermined blocks will need to be created and available but sometimes within the class itself some fancy footwork needs to be done, most especially if there is a wide range of abilities in the class, so that the advance students won't be bored and the up-and-coming students won't be lost.

For my hypothetical flexible syllabus I would propose, just to make it challenging for myself, that I would teach a course called beginning literature: Faulkner's The Bear. Given that it is grounded in the notion of going into the woods of rural Mississippi and preparations need to be made it is situational. The basic premise that the men in the story are doing something metaphysical by way of going into the woods gives us a communicative angle and as literature it has an idea of content. The tasks that I propose involve the incongruencies that occur within the text. I would take the sentence that is perhaps forty pages long and break it down across the semester (a structural approach; a seeking of subordinate and main clauses). This would be a challenge to teach under any circumstances and I'm not sure how it would work out but would like to give it a shot sometime.

The goal would be twofold: to become familiar with grammar, discourse, strategies and sociolinguistics as they apply to life and literature and to gain an appreciation of narrative as they help us to work at our own narrative. I thinking here of Jerome Bruner's (1990) use of the term narrative as a way that we deal with the ordinary and the extraordinary (incongruencies) in our lives.

From a theoretical aspect the idea of bridging the gap, creating scaffolding, in the classroom, going to where each student is, seems overwhelming, and I have been fortunate enough to see this magic happen so I know through the efforts of superlative teachers that it is possible. This syllabus might bring teacher and students together for a flexible syllabus, which is only slightly convert and mostly an attempt to build a bridge across the teacher student gap and use the best elements of different syllabi.

A covert syllabus would be the extreme case: a case in which the expectations of the teacher and the students was clearly quite far apart. In more usual circumstances the completely transparent syllabus, such as one described by I.S.P. Nation (2001), would be

more straightforward and more useful all around.　As such the students could benefit from the teacher's expertise more immediately.　Nonetheless a repertoire must be built up and without this, without some kind of consensus and common cause; the goals of the course will be more difficult to reach.

The flexible syllabus is an idea that relates to classroom dynamics and student motivation.　These are intertwined with who our students are and who we as teachers know ourselves to be.　Some teachers seem to acquire these insights naturally but for others a more systematic approach would be helpful.

Knowing yourself is one's lifework in a way and an ongoing process of self examination is just part of being alive.　But, specific to teaching we find such generalizations as strict or kind appended to instructors by their students.　And often different adjectives are applied to the same teacher by different students.　A balance between strictness and kindness might be fairness.　But the underlying assumption of these initial notions are indicative of different teaching styles.　I would make them more elaborate schema for the different teaching styles that I would tentatively describe as four distinct styles: The style of strictness, the style of generosity, the style of intellect and the style of charisma.　My cautionary note is that no one should try to force themselves into any particular style of teaching.　The point is rather that a person should find the style of teaching that suites them best.　My particular schema isn't meant to be any more than guidelines either.　I just thought they might give us a beginning place to start discussing what happens with classroom dynamics.

I think this can be particularly relevant for new teachers who often teach as their mentors or as their teachers taught and sometimes find that it is not as good a fit as they thought.　If there is a not good fit in a situation like this it might very well be an attempt to apply a less appropriate model.　Hence my four basic models are only meant to start us thinking about how this works.　I also don't want to imply any rigidity in the categories, for I feel that a person might have a configuration of qualities that could include more than one.　I would hope that my categories are sufficiently descriptive so I would like to address possible characteristics of students in the classroom.

Once a person has determined what kind of a teacher they are, how they like to do things, they can combine the sequencing and selection of materials that they have with an overall plan that will adjust to the particular group of students and circumstances in which they will be teaching.　On the face of it this is just having alternative activities and sequences for when things don't work.　This is where the flexible part comes in.

An example will be helpful.　Many teachers know that moment when they are greeted

by a wall of incomprehension, a moment when the specifics of a particular plan for any number of reasons, does not fit that particular occasion.   This is when a teacher needs to be light on their feet and have a second task available.   When using a four-strand approach as I do this will be most helpful to maintain the balance I am looking for between the strands of comprehensible input, focus on form, output, and fluency activities.   Since my classroom activities are divided, then for each component within that day's particular theme I have alternative activities available.   The transition can be smooth but backing out of a particular activity that fell flat can be smooth if the other activity is still within the particular parameters of the strands and the over all theme.

At this point it seems we have a notion about who we are as a teacher and how we want to develop our class and how we want to select and sequence our materials.   The largest component for consideration is the students themselves.   Categorizing them in the same way that we might categorize our own qualities would be one approach although we don't have the same luxury of time for examination.   We do have a profile based on our needs assessment and a general idea about what students in similar situation have done, if we have taught before.   Otherwise we have an idea composed of what we have learned in school from our teachers and colleagues about what goes on in a class.   We can characterize our students in a variety of ways when we are trying to establish a pattern of ongoing motivated learning behavior.   There is after all a common cause: the students have come to learn and the teacher comes to teach.   This will take us some distance but we need to be aware of certain pitfalls in this kind of thinking.   The primary pitfall is that students will be involved in language learning in the same way that we their teachers are.   This can lead to the use of meta-language, as one example of a problem.   My observation is that we often increase the cognitive load when we use too much meta-language about grammar and about the process of writing.   The extra things that the students have to deal with if we give them the terms to parse the parts of speech or describe the different parts of a paragraph are not always helpful, even though on most occasions I have gotten students who write very respectable 'topic sentences' without being able to describe them.   As a communicative medium, language has a very large subset of vocabulary to describe the parts of speech and parts of essays but when students are still in the stages of gaining the high frequency vocabulary that they need, I am not sure that the introduction of very much meta-language is helpful, except as it would be carefully selected and compared so as not to conflict with a more basic usage of a high frequency vocabulary item.

This is of course a generalization about students and we want to know more about the specific characteristics of the students themselves and what we can do to keep them

motivated.   I think that we need to carefully select and sequence material in ways like avoiding overuse of meta-language.   Then we need to go to where our students are.   This sounds pretty simple on the face of it.   What does it mean?

For myself, I assume that each student is a young version of Umeko Tsuda or Agatha Christie and somehow I need to get her from the basic state of her learning on the way to where she wants to go.   So there certainly is common ground to build on and it would be a mistake to assume that we are in any way at odds.   So the first thing would be of course a level check.   If this is handled in a way so that it is clear that it is diagnostic in nature and it's not too time consuming then the teacher and students are on their way to get acquainted.   This is a most important element because after all our final concern is what goes on in the students' heads.   That connection with the student can be called motivation or classroom management depending on the field of study examining it.   For our purposes here we could call it the connection.

The connection will produce the desired engagement of the students and now we can be concerned with 'what goes on in their heads.' We have an idea about what we want to teach and what sequence we want to teach it in but the students represent another variable.   My suggestion is that for a single class we have modular activities, a variety of things to do that will exercise different components of learning; one possibility would be the four strands of comprehensible input, focus on form, output, and fluency.   With these elements, or other elements that could be chosen some flexibility is order.   I know one instructor who gauges student involvement by the amount of buzz, that is, the level of activity in the room.   When it peaks then he changes the activity.   His philosophy is that the maximum amount of learning takes place up to and at this peak and that beyond that there are diminishing returns.   Certainly it depends on the instructor and the type of material whether this is the best approach but it reinforces the idea of a modular approach.

Beyond the practicality for teaching though, the modular approach allows for when an activity doesn't seem to be going anywhere.   Here we have to have an indicator from the students that they are not receiving.   Something this can be achieved simply by asking but there is sometimes just quiet. Discussion has been advocated by McKeachie (2002), among others, as a very useful tool for developing deeper processing that is needed for learning.   He goes on to offer many kinds of advice which can be summarized as respect for students.   To engage students in their own learning respect for their knowledge and identity is necessary for the rapport to be established that will allow student to engage in the common cause of learning with the teacher.

Key elements for me in leading students into discussion, and other activities, are to

introduce some variant of it from the first class to set the expectations and to break it down into manageable steps.

These steps are necessary. McKeachie describes some the reasons student resist discussion. He mentions habits of passivity and fear of feeling foolish as two possibilities. Although McKeachie's area of practice and research are America, I feel that his comments are relevant. Whereas there are certainly cultural considerations that teachers should be aware of, I still think these considerations are universal. The teacher should certainly be culturally sensitive, but I think that some of these considerations are transcendental.

The teacher's response will depend on their style and their students' styles. This is the place for the flexibility. A consensual working arrangement will evolve if the teacher can incorporate a balance so that students feel comfortable and respected. I suggest that a flexible syllabus with pliable modules is a way this can be successful.

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