

Life Syllabus: A New Research Agenda in English Language Teaching



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Considering the fact that the selection and ordering of what is to be taught are of great concern to teachers, a considerable number of syllabi have been proposed in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) to give shape to instruction. These syllabi have been designed in terms of structures, notions, functions, topics, or tasks, to facilitate language learning. Traditional procedures for syllabus design primarily involved the selection and sequencing of integrated linguistic features like grammar and vocabulary as well as notions, functions, and topics. Nevertheless, these approaches to syllabus design were criticized for their failure to satisfy learners' communicative needs, and also for misrepresenting the process of second language acquisition as linear (Baleghizadeh, 2008). It was not until recently that a range of alternative syllabi were devised, including procedural and task-based, whose focus was primarily on meaning, the learning process, and the learner. In fact, the task-based syllabus has been the latest attempt to tackle the process of language teaching and learning.

In a groundbreaking article, Pishghadam (2011) introduced a new type of syllabus which directed English teachers to give priority to life issues rather than language in class. This implies that the language syllabus must be planned according to the principles of the syllabus of life. This is not to suggest that language learning should be ignored in ELT contexts, but that it should not be considered the end product of a language class. Rather, primacy ought to be given to the improvement of learners' life qualities through the development and application of life syllabi in ELT classes.

This study aimed to illuminate the concept of the life syllabus, presenting it as a new research agenda

for second/foreign language studies. According to the life syllabus theory, language learners should become empowered in language class to tackle the problems they may encounter in life. In this way, language learning class becomes a site for enhancing life qualities. The following section provides a brief overview of the philosophy behind the notion of "education for life," followed by an introduction to *ELT for life*.

Education for Life

Although a nation's annual income as measured by the Gross Domestic Product, may be considered an indicator of life quality and well-being, there are numerous other factors which can be looked at and enhanced in order to improve the quality of life. These indicators include social relations, safety, physical health, freedom, human rights, success in marriage, happiness, emotional abilities, job satisfaction, and so on. Education is one area in which such broad factors are dealt with and are supposed to be improved. Accordingly, humanistic educators assert that students should be empowered to lead a good life. In fact, the core principle of humanistic education is that "there is only one subject-matter for education, and that is life in all its manifestations" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 6). That is to say, if the curriculum is to be developed based on life and all of its manifestations, then teaching should not only comprise mathematics, chemistry, or literature, but also emotions, relationships, attitudes, thinking styles, feelings, and states of mind.

The importance of life issues in education has been highlighted by educational philosophers such as Dewey (1897), Freire (1998), Krishnamurti (1981), and Walters (1997), who firmly believed that any system of education has an obligation to prepare people for meeting life's challenges in advance of

making them ready for employment or other personal gain. Thus, the primary aim of education should be to make humanity ready for that lifelong learning process. As Walters puts it, life is a meaningful and purposeful enterprise; therefore, any education system should aim to educate people in order to achieve the true purpose of life. Freire also demands that all educational

practices entail an unrestricted inquiry toward life and its challenges. In a similar vein, Krishnamurti calls for positive change in educational

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systems which train students to be like automatons and to seek and fight for personal gain, rather than helping them cultivate an integrated outlook on life and, hence, lead effective lives. He further argues that “The present system of education is making us subservient, mechanical and deeply thoughtless; though it awakens us intellectually, inwardly it leaves us incomplete, stultified and uncreative” (p. 7).

Fortunately, over the last few decades, the philosophy of education for life has been accepted by some schools such as the Education for Life Foundation (ELF) and the Ananda Living Wisdom College, which were established with the goals of improving children’s life qualities, preparing them to meet life challenges

and, in general, helping them reach their full potential. Sadly, the English language teaching profession has not adopted much of this philosophy. In

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what follows, the authors recommend that ELT classes also be sites for enhancing learners’ life qualities, and have come up with the idea of a life syllabus to be incorporated into the ELT curriculum.

Syllabus Design

Since many scholars have defined syllabus differently over the course of time and due to the fact that new trends in language teaching are emerging, there is no one single definition of the term. For example, structures have given way to situations, and tasks have replaced notions and functions. As a

case in point, Paulo Freire’s (1970) and John Dewey’s (1916) democracy-seeking views on education have inspired many scholars, researchers, and teachers who were ready to help learners have their voices heard within and out of the classroom. Their ideas were a protest against the “banking” approach to education, which prevented learners from thinking critically. In this approach the teacher was expected to transfer knowledge to students, who were expected to receive and accept the information without the right to question the knowledge being transferred. The banking concept of education was rejected by critical pedagogues as an instrument of oppression, and lesson planners and materials developers adapted more learner-based approaches to syllabus design.

Irrespective of the conflicting views on the nature of a syllabus, it is important to note the different definitions of the term in order to better clarify its meaning. The simplest definition was proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 80) as “a statement of what is to be learnt.” In a similar manner, Breen (1984) defines a syllabus as “a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning.” Moreover, Wilkins (1981) and Prabhu (1984) contend that a syllabus involves the stipulation of language teaching content based on some degree of order for the purpose of making teaching and learning more effective. Widdowson (1979) also regards a syllabus as “the specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners.”

Other scholars (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Breen, 1984; Candlin, 1984; Foley, 1991), on the other hand, look at syllabi from a retrospective perspective and argue that the content of ELT classes should not be determined in advance. That is to say, syllabi are localized accounts of what actually takes place in the classroom where the situated and emergent conditions make the process of syllabus design an ongoing and cyclical one (Candlin, 1984). As Allen (1984) puts it, language is a highly complex entity which may not be taught all at the same time; therefore, language teachers should always be concerned with adapting their material selection to the objectives of the course, the proficiency level of the learners, and the duration of the program. Accordingly, every attempt at syllabus design necessarily involves some degree of selection and grading of the content to be taught (Nunan, 1988).

ELT for Life

As well as educational policies fostering or hindering the improvement of individuals' lives, English language teachers can play a pivotal role in shaping learners' lives. Sometimes even a simple gesture on the part of a teacher, be it a significant one or not, may have an abysmal effect on a student's life (Freire, 1998). A study by Pishghadam and Saboori (2011) revealed that if language teachers highlight Standard English or respect language varieties, correct errors on the spot or just correct those which might otherwise hinder communication, and emphasize the use of the target language or allow optimal use of the students' home language, they can play an important part in shaping an important aspect of learners' lives, as well as their national and cultural identities.

Therefore, the authors suggest a new notion, ELT for life, given the fact that ELT, among several other disciplines, has already gained a superordinate, independent, and scientific status which grants it a more contributory role. The authors back Pishghadam's (2011) notion of applied ELT in which he claims that ELT has achieved an autonomous status, and therefore, it cannot be considered a part of linguistics anymore. ELT has already been enriched in theoretical foundation and now it is ready to export and contribute its ideas to other disciplines of knowledge. In what follows the authors briefly explain the dominated past, the dependent present, and the superordinate and independent future of ELT, arguing for a change in its focus from applying linguistic theories and the findings of other disciplines to playing a more contributory, life-changing role.

Although ELT primarily emerged out of the findings of theoretical linguistics (Berns & Matsuda, 2006), it soon liberated itself from those confines to the extent that it is currently studied as a branch of applied linguistics, receiving insights from the findings of other fields like sociology, psychology, neurology, and computers. Psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, for example, are two major branches of linguistics which have shed enough light on English language learning and teaching to help ELT practitioners enrich their understanding of the field. However, Pishghadam (2011) denounces the idea of ELT relying heavily on other fields of study to enrich itself. Rather, he argues that ELT should not be regarded as a part of applied linguistics any more. He invites the ELT community to

take a fresh look at the principles of the field and announce its independence. In other words, English language teachers should not be merely consumers of the findings of other disciplines (Schmitt, 2002). Rather, as an independent and superordinate field of study, "ELT has the potentiality to be applied to other domains of knowledge" (Pishghadam, 2011). Unfortunately, only a very few studies have been conducted so far to examine this potentiality. Below are a few examples that show contributions of ELT to the fields of psychology and sociology.

Pishghadam (2008), for example, studied the role of literary discussion in an EFL class on learners' critical thinking abilities. The results indicated that literary discussion in a foreign language could enhance learners' critical thinking. When ample opportunities for interaction and discussion are offered to learners in English language learning classes, learners' critical abilities can be increased. Moreover, Hosseini, Pishghadam, and Navari (2010) examined the role of English language classes in the development of emotional intelligence among sixty-three female students from Iranian high schools and private language institutes. The results of the study show that the communicative approach (based on interaction and group work) used in private language institutes enhanced language learners' emotional intelligence competencies. English language classes conducted according to the communicative theory helped learners overcome their anxiety, manage their stress, and enhance interpersonal competencies.

However, ELT classes do not always enhance learners' life qualities. As a case in point, in their attempts to qualitatively analyze the Iranian ELT context in the light of the theory of "World Englishes," Pishghadam and Saboori (2011) interviewed twenty-five English language teachers and learners, and observed seven language classes. The results of their study revealed that ELT in Iran still lives in the modern era. That is to say, the majority of English teachers considered American English the best standard to be followed in language classes, banned the use of Farsi (learners' home language) in their classes, and emphasized native-like pronunciation. English language teachers can play an important role in shaping learners' national and cultural identities. Having observed that Iranian English language teachers showed positive attitudes towards American culture and tried to act like native speakers, the authors concluded that English language

teachers, if not well-trained enough, can alienate learners from their own home culture.

These studies indicate that while ELT teachers may negatively affect some aspects of learners' lives, ELT classes can provide teachers with opportunities for enhancing learners' life qualities. This is exactly what Pishghadam (2011) means by the notion of "applied ELT."

Life Syllabus

Notwithstanding the fact that the evolution of ELT syllabus design from grammatical and lexical syllabi to functional-notional orientations, and later on to procedural and task-based models has shown considerable positive changes, there is one point on which scholars of the field have consensus and about which we want to express our serious concern: The primacy of language learning. Hopefully, one of the current trends in ELT syllabus design is to include non-linguistic objectives in the syllabus. That is to say, ELT no longer confines itself to only developing learners' language knowledge and skills; rather, it is also responsible for advancing learners' whole-person development, including not only intellectual development but also learning strategies, confidence, motivation, and interest (Richards, 2001).

Any such attempt would, of course, enhance learners' life qualities. However, even such a trend may not help ELT reach its full potential. In order to accomplish this goal, ELT practitioners should design their linguistic syllabus around the life syllabus so that, unlike in previous trends, the ELT profession becomes a *life-and-language* enterprise, giving priority to the quality of learners' lives in advance of enhancing their language-related skills. Therefore, it seems quite necessary to present *life syllabus* as a new agenda which makes issues of concern in life, and not in language, its utmost priority.

The rationales for proposing life syllabi in ELT contexts are, according to Pishghadam (2011), the unique features offered by English language learning classes. These include the possibility of holding discussions on a variety of social, political, and scientific topics, the great emphasis placed on group and pair work, the comparability of the home culture and the foreign culture, the acquaintance with the structures and words of a second/foreign language, the ease of projecting one's own true identity through the L2, the serious attempts made by learners to learn another language, and the enjoyable atmosphere of ELT classes. By virtue of these unique features, by using the life

syllabus, the English language teachers would first reinforce learners' creativity, motivation, emotional intelligence, and so on, and then teach a language. As a result, learners' depression, stress, anxiety disorders, burnout, and so on would be diminished, or even eradicated. Language teachers need to stipulate in advance which domain of learners' lives is going to be targeted, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, or creativity, and then they should design their linguistic syllabus to achieve this goal. In this way, language learning becomes a more purposeful and educational process.

Closing Remarks

In sum, after traditional approaches to syllabus design, such as grammatical and lexical, were discarded due to their failure in both preparing learners for effective communication, and in perceiving second language acquisition as a non-linear process, some alternative models such as task-based and procedural syllabi were proposed. Since even these approaches were flawed, some modifications were made to them. These modifications paved the way for introducing some new trends to syllabus design, including, the co-existence of the traditional and the new types of syllabi, the focus on the process of language learning, the inclusion of non-linguistic objectives, and the advent of the integrated syllabus. However, it was suggested that due to their heavy emphasis on the primacy of language learning, these trends may not help ELT reach its full potential.

In order to make this happen, we now need to pass to the scientifically tested approach to ELT which results in a fundamental shift or change that has evolved out of the past practices and theories. Accordingly, this article suggests the life syllabus as a new research agenda in second/foreign language studies. The authors strongly recommend that this new type of syllabus be applied to ELT classes. Despite inherent differences in design and application, all ELT syllabi concede to the primacy of language learning. The authors have provided a new framework for researchers of the field to integrate language learning with issues of concern in learners' lives.

Following Pishghadam's (2011) notion of *Applied* which looks at ELT as a full-fledged and scientific field of study ready to contribute and be applied to other disciplines, it is suggested that language classes be considered places where the enhancement

of different aspects of learners' lives, including social intelligence, creativity, motivation, critical abilities, and so on, is pre-meditated. For example, if a language class is aimed at improving learners' critical thinking abilities, language teachers need to design their linguistic syllabus in a way to achieve this purpose. To this end, it is suggested that critical thinking be enhanced as a core academic skill rather than as a warm-up or mood-changing activity. Critical thinking can simply be enhanced through English language teachers' manipulation and mediation of learners' cognitive abilities. This may be accomplished by asking challenging questions which raise learners' critical awareness. To give but one example, Fisher (2003, cited in Jarvis, 2005) suggests seven types of questions that may stimulate critical thinking, namely, context, temporal order, particular events, intentions, choices, meaning (meta-discourse message), and telling. These questions can be utilized to help learners improve their language proficiency, and at the same time to enhance their critical thinking abilities. Finally, it is worth noting that the investigation of how to design and implement life syllabi in English language learning classes opens a new horizon for interested researchers who can give practitioners greater insight into those areas of life where language learners need more improvement.

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