8   The syllabus

I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another Man's.

(William Blake, 'Jerusalem')

In this first chapter on the applications of a course design model, we shall be looking at the syllabus and considering the following questions:
1   What do we mean by a syllabus?
2   Why should we have a syllabus?
3   On what criteria can a syllabus be organised?
4   What role should a syllabus play in the course design process?

1   What do we mean by a syllabus?

Most teachers might regard this as an unnecessary question. A syllabus is a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learnt. But, in fact, there are several different ways in which a syllabus can be defined. This stems from the fact that the statement of what will be learnt passes through several different stages before it reaches its destination in the mind of the learner. Each stage on its route imposes a further layer of interpretation.

a) *The evaluation syllabus*

As we have said, at its simplest level a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learnt. This kind of syllabus will be most familiar as the document that is handed down by ministries or other regulating bodies. It states what the successful learner will know by the end of the course. In effect, it puts on record the basis on which success or failure will be evaluated. Thus we might refer to this as an *evaluation* syllabus. It reflects an official assumption as to the nature of language and linguistic performance. For example, if the syllabus is framed in terms of grammatical structures, this reflects a view that knowing a language consists of knowing the constituent structures. It would be impossible to produce an evaluation syllabus without having a view of what language is and thus how it can be broken down.

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b) *The organisational syllabus*

As well as listing what should be learnt, a syllabus can also state the order in which it is to be learnt. We might call this an *organisational* syllabus. In a rough sense, evaluation syllabuses fulfil this role, in that they normally list what should be learnt in, for example, the first year of learning etc. The organisational syllabus is most familiar in the form of the contents page of a textbook, and it is this form of syllabus that most people would think of when asked: 'What is a syllabus?' The organisational syllabus differs from the evaluation syllabus in that it carries assumptions about the nature of learning as well as language, since, in organising the items in a syllabus, it is necessary to consider factors which depend upon a view of how people learn, e.g.:
– What is more easily learnt?
– What is more fundamental to learning?
– Are some items needed in order to learn other items?
– What is more useful in the classroom?
Criteria like these must be used in order to determine the order of items. The organisational syllabus, therefore, is an implicit statement about the nature of language and of learning.

c) *The materials syllabus*

The two syllabuses considered so far might be regarded as pure syllabuses, in that they have not been interpreted. They are a straightforward statement of what is to be learnt with some indication of the order in which the items should be learnt. The syllabuses say nothing about how learning will be achieved. But a syllabus, like a course design model, is only as good as the interpretation that is put on it. On its route to the learner the organisational syllabus goes through a series of interpretations.

The first person to interpret the syllabus is usually the materials writer. So we get our third kind of syllabus – the *materials* syllabus. In writing materials, the author adds yet more assumptions about the nature of language, language learning and language use. The author decides the contexts in which the language will appear, the relative weightings and integration of skills, the number and type of exercises to be spent on any aspect of language, the degree of recycling or revision. These can all have their effect on whether and how well something is learnt. For example, if certain vocabulary items are presented in texts which appeal to the learners, they are more likely to be remembered, because the learners' attention will be more involved.