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Syllabus: how much does it contribute to the effective communication with the students?

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Abstract

Course syllabi provide valuable information which enables meaningful communication between the students and the instructors. They can also be used as a contract, a plan or as a means for learning and teaching. The lively and effective classroom atmosphere, where all the students are engaged into the lesson, could be obtained when the syllabi are prepared thoroughly in order to answer students' questions and comments beforehand. Due to the fact that the students' achievement can be determined by the amount of the match between the students' performance or needs and the instructors' expectations, well-designed syllabi are very crucial in terms of format and wording. The present study took place at the ELT department of a private university in Istanbul. The authors aim to investigate how effective the syllabi prepared by the instructors are in terms of communicating assessment with the students. The data was collected by means of the syllabi of the courses in the undergraduate program of English language department and interviews were held with the students from each level (1st-4th) to see if there is a discrepancy between the assessment policies given in the syllabus and the actual use of assessment techniques in the classroom. Twenty syllabi have been analyzed. These syllabi used in the study belong to the instructors who give courses only related to ELT field. Furthermore, the undergraduate program consists of courses including methodological and pedagogical approaches to foreign language teaching as well as raising students' awareness of the English language system. The objective of the program is to equip the students with advanced and specialized knowledge in the field and to help them acquire skills for teacher research and professional development. The results show that the syllabi which have been used are not insufficient in communicating with the students but need to be enhanced by the help of students' expectations and perceptions.

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1. Introduction

A syllabus is generally defined as a plan that states exactly what students at a school or college should learn in a particular subject. It is not only about the knowledge to be gained, but also it helps the students to meet the desired

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expectations which make them feel secure although it seems that the syllabus is a piece of written document of the assignments, readings, activities. A well-designed course syllabus can serve a variety of purposes: as an agreement between teacher and student; as a device for communicating, seriousness, and expectations; as an overall plan of action for the course; and as a cognitive map of the course to share with students. (Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

The success of the course is determined by how well the objectives and the outline are designed. A carefully planned, clearly written, comprehensive syllabus is one of the most important and valuable resources which can be provided to the students. It may prevent the misunderstandings in terms of course goals and objectives, assessment and evaluation standards, grading policies, student or faculty behavior, assignments, readings, and activities. (Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Littlefield (1999a) suggests 7 purposes for a syllabus to be an effective one such as a setting tone for a course, a type of motivation for students to reach their academic goals, a planning tool for faculty, structuring tool of the students' work, and a contract between faculty and students about the expectations. Serafin (1990) investigated the relationship between the changes inserted to a course syllabus and the final grades gained by the students. It was found out that the more explicit the course syllabi in terms of number of objectives, content, instructional resources, and grading components the better it enables the processing of the information gained in the a learning situation and the students' final grade performances as well. In another study conducted by Ishiyama & Hartlaub (2002), it has been argued that supportive statements encourage students and enhance their performance. It has been suggested that the instructors who worded their syllabi in rewarding language rather than punishing are thought to use their power more fairly and have students who developed more positive attitude towards the course and the instructor.

Parkes, Fix & Harris (2003) reported a study about the assessment elements of college instructors and their assessment practices and their policies on their syllabi. After 217 syllabi were analyzed, the results showed that instructors fail to communicate with the students by not including the assessment practices, so their syllabi lose their power as a communicating tool.

2. Methodology

The study

The aim of the present study is to investigate how well and detailed the syllabi are designed in terms of communicating with the ELT department students and to see whether there is a difference between what is written and what is actually done by the instructors offering the courses in the department.

Specifically speaking, the following questions were asked:

1. What are the components of the syllabi offered?
2. Is there a match between the information provided in the syllabi and the application of it in the classroom?

3. Sample & Setting

In the present study, 20 syllabi were collected from all the instructors teaching ELT related courses in English Language Teaching department at Yeditepe University. The ELT undergraduate program consists of courses including methodological and pedagogical approaches to foreign language teaching as well as raising students' awareness of the English language system.

4. Data Collection

Data was collected by means of syllabi consisted of all the ELT related-courses offered at the department and an interview to elicit ideas about the syllabi, attitudes towards the courses offered at the department and the towards the instruction strategies.

5. Data analysis

The syllabi collected and the interview was analyzed through pattern coding descriptively. Two categories have been investigated such as course policies and assessment issues. The frequencies of the characteristics will be given as percentages in parenthesis hereafter. Types of assessment (95%) and the course objectives (60%) were covered

by the majority of the syllabi. Weekly schedule (85%) was one of the variables which were attached to the syllabi with the due dates (70%) of assignments and the people's names for the presentations if there are any. Make up exams (3%) and late assignments (3%) were not mostly included in the syllabi by the instructors. This is because of the fact that they never do accept late assignments and give make up exams unless there is a proven emergency case.

Critical reviews were coded when the instructors assigned a reading and asked for a critical reaction to the article or paper which is taken into account by 40% of the instructors to assess students' final grade summatively. Moreover, according to the overall analysis of assessment strategies, it was seen that most of the instructors use presentations (80%) as an assessment strategy. Of those, 31.25% of them required individual or pair work for presentations. The rest of them were supposed to be presented as a product of a group. Class attendance (70%) and exams (75%) were also given as assessment tools and these were followed by active participation in the class (55%). On the other hand, exams (75%) were used as summative assessment to give them a final mark at the end of the semester. The other assessment tool can be counted as portfolios, journals, demonstrations, projects, assignments and quizzes.

6. Interview results

The results of the interview were gathered under three sub-categories such as the characteristics of the syllabi, evaluation of the current syllabi, diversions from the syllabi. Course objectives, grading and the contact information of the instructors were *sine qua non* in a syllabi from the students' perspective. Assessment strategies came second and they really would like to find the weekly schedule attached to syllabus. Some instructors' think that, the longer the syllabi is, the better it shows the way. However, the students do not agree with those instructors at this point because they state that when the syllabi are more than 3-4 pages long, they never pay attention and spend time to read it. They only look for the due dates and assessment if they need it. Moreover, the length of the syllabi give some clues about the personality and style of the teacher. If the syllabi is short (1-2 page long) or not so long and the font size is bigger, the students think that s/he is a tolerant and easy-going person and they can pass the course without any pain and stress. On the other hand, when the syllabus is so long and detailed, they state that the instructor is critical and the course would be demanding and difficult.

The only thing that all the students agree about the only change that was done in the syllabi during the term is the skipping some weeks according to the weekly schedule and renouncing the assignments or the projects due to time constraints.

7. Findings & discussion

In an attempt to answer the 1st research question namely the characteristics of the syllabi used in the ELT department of a private university, the results indicated that there are nine aspects commonly regarded in the syllabi such as types of assessment, schedule, goals and objectives, due dates, attendance, academic dishonesty, late assignments and make-up exams. The effectiveness of the syllabi with the students was the concern of research question 2. The syllabi are not inadequate but needs to be improved by the help of students' perceptions and expectations gained from the interview. As the syllabus is a tool to send the message to the students regarding the instructors' personality and about the investment (McKeachie, 1986) at the very beginning, it cannot be ignored to make it more favorable.

8. Conclusion

While the present study has attempted to examine syllabi effectiveness in communicating with the students, its limitations should be borne in mind. First of all, the number of the syllabi was not enough to make generalizations. The data was gathered from only one department in an only one institution. Moreover, there could have been an interview with the instructors to compare their perceptions about the syllabus design with the students'.

In conclusion, creating a lively classroom atmosphere and fruitful learning outcomes are known as vital things that all the instructors desire to achieve. Designing an efficient syllabus by including all the necessary information completely could be the first step for that.

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