



## A critical review of the English syllabus of the English language department at Zawia University, Libya

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### Abstract

This study aims to critically review the current English language syllabus provided by the English department located in the faculties of education at Zawia University in Libya. It analyses the weaknesses and strengths of the current English-language-teaching syllabus in terms of the grammar, writing, reading and oral communication courses for the four years of undergraduate study. The data were collected using document analysis, with the findings highlighting that the English language syllabus has inherent strengths, in addition to certain weaknesses that need to be urgently addressed to ensure that the students' needs are being met.

**Keywords:** communication, English language, language skills, syllabus

### 1. Introduction

In the current era, learning English has become essential since it represents the most widely learned and spoken language internationally (Alvarez-Sandoval, 2005; Crystal, 2012; Wolf and Butler, 2017; Badger, 2018) [4, 9, 25, 5]. The motivation for second language learning and teaching could be related to internal and external drivers, with both offering educational value to learners (Alsagoff *et al.*, 2012; Cook, 2013; Renandya and Widodo, 2016; Pennycook, 2017) [3, 8, 20, 21]. In Libya, 'the majority of language learners veer to English as the second language' (Najeeb, 2013:1243) [16], while Elmadwi and Shepherd (2014:29) [11] reported that 'English is taught as a foreign language and the purpose of learning English is for communication and to communicate efficiently'. Consequently, Libyans need to acquire the English language in order to communicate with the rest of the world, not only because it is the language used in oil and gas sale agreements, but also as it represents the language of science and technology in the current global economy (Otman and Karlberg, 2007; Albukbak, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2018) [18, 1, 14]. It is noted that the English language syllabus used in the majority of Libyan universities is outdated and does not fulfil the learners' needs, with Zawia University (known in the pre-2011 revolution era as 7th of April University) no exception.

### 2. Background

The English language was introduced to the Libyan education system in the 1950s; however, in 1986 the language was prohibited from school and university curricula nationwide due to the development of political tensions between the Libyan government and the UK in particular, and Western nations in general, which negatively affected the educational system at that time (Sawani, 2009) [23]. The regime's decision to ban the English language from education curricula continued for more than six years, with the negative

consequences of this policy becoming evident in the mid-1990s through emerging evidence that university graduates had a very limited grasp of English (Orafi and Borg, 2009; Alkhaldy, 2012) [17, 2]. Despite English language teaching and learning being re-introduced around 1994, this faced many challenges because of the proscription's impact on the learning and teaching of English for a considerable period of time.

The Libyan Ministry of Education offers curricula and books for teachers and students at the school level. On the other hand, at the university tier there are no curricula in the departments, and the English departments are no exception. To overcome this phenomenon, the teaching staff in departments usually meet and assemble general outlines for the subjects that students should study each year.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

The English language syllabi at the university level are poorly designed in Libya and are suffering from a range of problems, with Suwaed and Rahouma (2015:694) [24] highlighting one of the main challenges for English language teaching in higher education in Libya: 'there is no consistent syllabus to teach in higher education'. This situation results in a lack of standardisation in syllabi, and even between lecturers in the same department. In other words, the English language syllabi at the university level are poorly designed because they are led by individuals as opposed to policy. Consequently, Libyan teachers understood and implemented the syllabi according to their beliefs that were not aligned with the learners' needs and the objectives of the syllabi (Orafi, 2008). In addition, there is no cyclical refining and evaluation of the syllabi.

### 4. The Aim of the Study

As the current syllabus of the English department of the faculties of education at Zawia University was designed in

2009 and has not been reviewed or evaluated to date, this study aims to critically review the current English language syllabus provided by the department. It analyses the weaknesses and strengths of the current English-language-teaching syllabus in terms of the grammar, writing, reading and oral communication courses for the four years of undergraduate study at the university four years of university.

## 5. Literature Review

According to Carter and McCarthy (2014) <sup>[7]</sup>, the English as a foreign language (EFL) syllabus can be defined as a set of headings indicating items that have been selected by a language planner or material writer to be covered in a particular part of the curriculum or in a course series. Furthermore, a well-designed language-teaching syllabus should essentially address the following aims: i) indicate the aims and objectives of learning and teaching, ii) clarify the classroom procedures the lecturer may wish to follow, iii) form a basis for assessing learners' improvement, and iv) ensure that its content is appropriate to the broader language curriculum (Bareen, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2006) <sup>[6, 15]</sup>. Meanwhile, Dubin and Olshtain (2000) <sup>[10]</sup> suggested a number of items that a syllabus needs to contain: i) a list of programme objectives, ii) a list of content for each course, iii) suggested techniques and procedures for teaching the courses' content, and iv) recommendations to process the assessment and evaluation mechanisms.

According to Kachru (2006) <sup>[13]</sup>, designing a language course includes a range of aspects such as how a selected syllabus will be adapted to a certain learning level and to local context, how lesson units will be structured, and by means of what methodology the syllabus content will be delivered to the learner. Similarly, Zheng (2013:37) <sup>[26]</sup> claimed that '*when designing a syllabus, the teaching goal and teaching methods should be clearly included in the syllabus. Besides, topics or tasks can also be included in it*'. Moreover, the procedure for syllabus design in language teaching normally involves gauging the needs of the students, selecting the teaching approaches and materials, and determining the tools and criteria of assessment (Richards and Renandya, 2002) <sup>[21]</sup>. Similarly, Graves (2000) <sup>[12]</sup> asserted that designing a language course involves establishing the learning objectives and determining the content, materials, methods and evaluation. The above framework illustrates that the process of designing a language course is not hierarchical and that the starting point should rely on the designer's understanding and beliefs, the context and the knowledge regarding the learners. Therefore, selecting a certain type of syllabus is an important decision in language teaching programmes that is dependent upon the setting.

In the literature, several types of language teaching syllabi have been introduced in the language-teaching field such as the structural syllabus and task-based syllabus. Typically, in an individual course two or more syllabi can be combined for the reason that language syllabi have a few features in common. In addition, they are built on communicative aims that focus on communicative competency as a specific language teaching goal and the interdependence of language and communication (Rodgers and Richards, 2001) <sup>[22]</sup>.

In summary, it is important to underscore that no single type

of syllabus is applicable for all teaching contexts, as each context has its own requirements and circumstances. Essentially, during the process of designing a syllabus all possible factors that may affect the effectiveness of a particular syllabus should be taken into consideration, which may lead to the discovery of a practical solution to the issue of appropriateness and effectiveness in syllabus design and implementation.

## 6. Methodology

This study aims to review the current English language syllabus of the English department in the faculties of education at Zawia University in Libya; therefore, the data were collected through document analysis. In this research, documents related to the research focus were gathered for analysis. The documents included a syllabus and a sample of examination papers of the writing and grammar subjects for years 1, 2, 3 and 4 for the academic years 2016 and 2017. The English syllabus was designed in 2009 and was in use at the time of data collection. It had been introduced to provide information about the aim, objectives, content and recommended sources for each course in the four-year English language programme at Zawia University.

The analysis of this syllabus followed a number of steps. The first was to reduce the English syllabus to one page by focusing on the four language-skills-related subjects including oral communication, writing, reading and grammar for all years, and then considering those subjects as categories where each category contained two codes: learning outcomes and book level. Then, the learning outcomes were summarised for each subject, and the level of the recommended books established to verify their appropriacy for the respective university students. After that, the assessment instructions for the subjects were considered and a third code added for the oral communication skills subject as it is the only subject that has a briefly stated assessment included in the syllabus. The subsequent step was to compare the examination papers' content against the syllabus content. Finally, a professional skills category was included and the professional skills that should be achieved after each level were extracted, although these are only clearly stated for the third and fourth years.

## 7. Findings

The findings of the English syllabus review showed that the syllabus has many weaknesses that need to be urgently addressed to ensure that the students' needs are being fulfilled, in addition to some strengths, as described below.

One of the advantages of the English language syllabus is the availability of learning outcomes and content for all courses, while another is that there is clear and gradual progress shown in the writing, reading and grammar courses that builds from year 1 to year 4. In addition, the syllabus offers a brief explanation for the assessment of oral communication skills for all years, with a number of assessment criteria such as fluency and pronunciation. Furthermore, the grade weighting for the oral communication skills is stated as 50% for the written examination and 50% for the oral examination. The final strength is the availability of an indicative textbooks list that can be employed for designing the lectures.

On the other hand, a number of weaknesses emerged. Firstly,

the syllabus focuses on grammar, writing and reading courses to a greater extent than other courses. Another limitation is the lack of progression for the learning outcomes of the oral communication skills subject, which remain unchanged from year 1 to year 4. Next, no assessment details are mentioned for the writing, reading and grammar courses in terms of criteria and method. A final weakness is that the recommended textbooks for developing the oral communication, writing and reading skills do not extend beyond the intermediate level, although the recommended grammar course books are all at the advanced level. Table 1 below summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the English language syllabus at Zawia University.

**Table 1:** Strengths and weaknesses of the English language syllabus

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All courses have learning outcomes and content lists.</li> <li>There is an indicative books list.</li> <li>Gradual progress is shown in the writing, reading and grammar courses.</li> <li>Brief explanation for the assessment of oral communication skills for all years.</li> <li>Recommended books for the grammar courses are all extended advanced level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The main focus is placed on grammar, writing and reading courses.</li> <li>No gradual progress shown in the learning outcomes of the oral communication skills.</li> <li>Discrepancy in the level of textbooks.</li> <li>No assessment details mentioned for writing, reading and grammar courses in terms of criteria and method.</li> </ul>

### 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the analysis of the syllabus, it is evident that the English language syllabus of Zawia University is not currently meeting the students’ needs and thus needs to be refined. It is recommended that the initial step in redesigning the English language courses is to carry out a needs assessment, as in order to fill the gap between the current students’ level and the desired counterpart, it is crucial to consider the students’ needs when establishing the course goals, objectives, teaching and assessment methods.

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