Improving the relevance of an English syllabus within a top-down teaching context

Mejorar la relevancia de un programa de inglés en el contexto de una política institucional vertical

Melhorar a relevância de um programa de inglês no contexto de uma política institucional vertical

Fernando Peralta-Castro
Universidad de Colima, Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras, México
peralta@ucol.mx
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5274-5838

Abstract

This educational intervention aims to investigate the design of a language syllabus based on school needs within the context of a Mexican Higher Education Institution (MHEI) where the syllabus design process is top-down. Because the investigation requires the researcher to comprehend the subjects of study, data collection techniques which allow participants to express their beliefs and opinions are entirely appropriate. Therefore, in this study, interviews were carried out, as they are widely used in empirical studies, being a suitable way of gaining insight into the participants' individual and collective process of reflective enquiry. A questionnaire to elicit beliefs and a language test were also administered. The results suggest that the Needs Analysis (NA) procedures implemented turned out to be very useful for gathering the kinds of data needed to enable to meet the learning needs of the teaching context more effectively. In addition, the research reveals that participant teachers were able to accept full responsibility for themselves and their actions as a result of the research, and were able to improve the syllabus as planned. The paper presents an analysis of both a General English Syllabus (GES) and of the School Based Syllabus

(SBS) and reveals a clear contrast between them. The findings also suggest that the SBS design process may present challenges.

Keywords: analysis, needs, school-based, teachers

Resumen

Esta intervención educativa tiene como objetivo investigar el diseño de un programa de enseñanza de inglés centrado en las necesidades de una escuela. En el contexto de una institución de Educación Superior Mexicana donde el proceso de diseño es vertical. La intervención busca que el investigador comprenda a profundidad el tema. Por consiguiente, el uso de técnicas de recolección de datos que permitan a los participantes expresar sus creencias y opiniones son apropiadas. En consecuencia, se llevaron a cabo entrevistas ya que son ampliamente utilizadas en estudios empíricos, siendo una forma adecuada de obtener información sobre el proceso individual y colectivo de reflexión de los participantes. También se aplicó un cuestionario para conocer las creencias de los estudiantes, y un examen diagnóstico de inglés. Los resultados muestran que el análisis fue favorable para cumplir con las necesidades de aprendizaje del contexto de enseñanza de manera más efectiva. Además, la investigación revela que los maestros participantes aceptaron la responsabilidad de sus acciones, como resultado de la investigación y pudieron mejorar el programa de estudios según lo planeado. El documento presenta el análisis de un programa de enseñanza de inglés general, y uno centrado en las necesidades de la escuela y revela un claro contraste entre ellos. Los hallazgos también sugieren que el proceso de diseño del programa centrado en la escuela puede presentar desafíos.

Palabras claves: análisis, escuela, necesidades, programa, maestros.

Resumo

Esta intervenção educacional tem como objetivo investigar a concepção de um programa de ensino de Inglês com foco nas necessidades de uma escola. No contexto de uma instituição mexicana de ensino superior onde o processo de design é vertical. A intervenção busca que o pesquisador compreenda em profundidade o assunto. Portanto, é adequado o uso de técnicas de coleta de dados que permitam aos participantes expressar suas crenças e opiniões. Consequentemente, as entrevistas foram realizadas por serem amplamente utilizadas em estudos empíricos, sendo uma forma adequada de se obter informações sobre o processo de reflexão individual e coletivo dos participantes. Também foi aplicado um questionário para

conhecer as crenças dos alunos e um teste diagnóstico de inglês. Os resultados mostram que a análise foi favorável para atender de forma mais eficaz as necessidades de aprendizagem do contexto de ensino. Além disso, a pesquisa revela que os professores participantes assumiram a responsabilidade por suas ações em decorrência da pesquisa e puderam aprimorar o currículo conforme planejado. O documento apresenta a análise de um programa geral de ensino de inglês, focado nas necessidades da escola e revela um claro contraste entre eles. Os resultados também sugerem que o processo de concepção do programa centrado na escola pode apresentar desafios.

Palavras-chave: análise, escola, necessidades, programa, professores.

Introduction

English language is at a widely used language of the world. People devote large amounts of time and energy to the task of mastering this language. Teachers spend a lot of time planning language lessons, preparing teaching materials and teaching. Government agencies of non-English speaking countries have implemented curriculum reforms. They have offered students opportunities to develop their English language skills, and have widely invested in infrastructure for the learning of English. They have also provided funding for wages for language teachers. For people in emerging economies English proficiency has proven to be a critical tool, which helps tap into new opportunities for business and academic development (Hernández-Fernández and Rojas, 2018).

English language is at this time, the main foreign language taught within the educational system in Mexico as it is part of the curriculum of both lower secondary and upper secondary education. Several MHEIs have incorporated English as a compulsory subject across their curriculum, in the belief that its addition would not only enhance the policy of internationalization, but would also allow university students to become fluent English language users and, therefore, potential actors in the world of today.

The whole Mexican educational system in general and this institution in particular, has made every effort to provide students with opportunities to develop their English language skills. Examples of these efforts include the allocation of infrastructure for the learning of English, as well as the provision of funding for the payment of wages of language teachers.

In the particular case of the institution where this study was conducted, the language

instruction of the syllabus is organised into courses with 5 levels of proficiency, from 'Beginner' to 'Advanced' (B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference). English classes are distributed with a frequency and intensity of 3 hours per week in most of the undergraduate programmes, though in some cases is different. The GES for each level (1-5) contains a list of vocabulary, grammar, and functional items organised into units, with each level to be taught within a single semester, and it is based on a course book. The syllabus is included in the wider undergraduate curriculum document of all academic, and teachers through instruction, implement the prescribed syllabus.

Within the approach to syllabus design adopted, there seems to be a gap between institutional English language teaching policy and classroom implementation, as different people perform roles. For instance, authorities decide the teaching of English must be integrated across the undergraduate curriculum. Syllabus designers decide on the organization of the courses as well as the content of the syllabus. Whilst teachers and learners are the recipients and implementers of decisions previously made. This approach to curriculum design falls within what Graves (2008) has called the "specialist approach to curriculum" (p. 150).

Holliday (1994) explains that the problem concerning the place of English in the curriculum in countries where English is not the native language is often that they tend to import teaching methodologies from Britain, Australian and North American (BANA) countries. A criticism of the adoption of teaching methodologies from BANA countries in radically different geographical and social contexts is that none of them are derived from school experience and experimentation in those new locations. That is to say that they have not been adapted to the context of the school and the profiles and needs of the learners. In the same way, they have been directed at school teachers working in a different educational culture and often cannot be implemented in the ways in which they were originally conceived (Nunan, 1991). This is related to what Graves (2008) has identified as hierarchical approaches to curriculum. Hierarchical approaches prescribe 'what is to be taught and teachers through instruction implement the plan' (p. 149). A problem with hierarchical approaches to the language syllabus is that there is a mismatch between the domains, policy makers, syllabus designers, teachers and learners as they perform different curriculum functions, use different discourse and produce different curriculum products (Graves, 2008).

Consequently, it seems appropriate to seek an approach to English language teaching which depends less on official policy and more on situated syllabus design and development

activities located within the school itself, an approach which takes into account relevant local knowledge and understanding. This study investigates the activities of a group of language teachers, working in a Higher Education Institution, who managed to improve their English language syllabus. Changes to the syllabus were made based on school needs, instead of the traditionally more centralized decision-making processes.

School Based Syllabus

School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) can be seen as a response to hierarchical based curriculum development. SBCD argues that centrally based curriculum developers do not take into account the different needs of students and teachers in a particular teaching context. Hierarchical approaches to curriculum development ignore classroom teachers and provide them with little incentive, involvement and job satisfaction (Marsh, 2009).

In SBCD, teachers play a predominant role, as they do not only apply the knowledge prescribed by experts, but also generate their own understanding, supported by their own experience and practice. This is vital, as they know the school situations better than anybody else and can therefore make a unique contribution to the success of the curriculum (Bay, Vural, Kahramanoglu and Aydin Ask, 2016).

Nghihalwa (2018) propose that the generation of knowledge emerging from teachers' experience of the context contributes to their professional status, giving them the legitimate role of curriculum developers. This is an idea that contrasts with the traditional top-down schema, in which teachers play the role of implementers of the ideas of external curriculum developers and researchers, who are the accepted generators of disciplinary knowledge. According to more recent studies, the generation of knowledge emerges from practice, eventually developing into curriculum theories that greatly differ from those supported by curriculum design experts.

Balyer, Özcan and Yildiz (2017) provide a rationale for teacher participation in curriculum planning and development and they suggest that due to the crucial role teachers play in the classroom, they have profound knowledge of learners. Teachers can easily discover problematic situations and bringing about change or improvement.

Teacher involvement in decision-making related to the process of curriculum design and development enhances their level of professionalism and leads to higher levels of teacher autonomy, professionalization and the pursuit of a curriculum which is better designed to meet the diverse needs of pupils and communities (Abudu and Mensah, 2016).

Fostering the participation of teachers in the curriculum development process implies professional development opportunities; professional development programs and activities, on the other hand, must enable teachers to understand what is expected of them if they become involved in curriculum development activities. The idea of involving teachers in curriculum enactment involves many challenges and teachers may encounter various problems while designing the curriculum. These may be related to the conditions established for the design process and a lack of the knowledge and skills needed to carry out collaborative design processes (Huizinga et al., 2014).

An ELT approach that can serve the purpose of SBCD is Needs Analysis, as it aims to collect the information necessary to define and validate a defensible curriculum that satisfies the language learning requirements of a specific setting (Brown, 2006).

Needs Analysis (NA) provides a starting point to determine the aims, the method, the content and the assessment strategies of a language course (Nunan, 1988; Jordan, 1997). Iwai et al. (1999) define NA as '(…) the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students' (p. 6), whilst Brown (2006) provides a more comprehensive definition by adding elements such as subjective and objective needs, as well as context. Brown (2006) suggests that:

> Needs analysis is the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purpose that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of the particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation (p. 2).

One common approach to NA is the analysis of learners' communicative language needs. In this regard, Elsaid Mohammed, Mohammed Nur (2018) claim that the analysis of learners' communicative language needs concerning the target situation has shown that it helps gather appropriate data to serve as the basis for developing successful language courses. The analysis of the target situation goes hand in hand with the analysis of learners' language knowledge and skills. Through these two analyses, researchers can gather the appropriate data to serve as the basis for developing language courses.

NA attempts to document the design development process through the knowledge and views of local participants, thus retaining and a merely linguistic approach to the teaching target

situation seems to be very simplistic and will only reveal a partial view of the situation. For that reason, it is appropriate to also explore other approaches, to establish a position regarding the most suitable one for the context. For example, it is important to consider the beliefs and opinions of language learners, as strategic participants of learning and teaching; it seems reasonable to take their opinions into account accordingly before making any decisions about teaching, especially if the approach to syllabus is school-based, as learners' beliefs about language learning might influence their performance (Rahman, 2015).

The Study

The research approach chosen is predominantly qualitative in terms of its emphasis on 'practice, participation/collaboration, reflection, interpretation, and, often, emancipation; this approach puts it squarely in opposition to positivist social research' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p. 29). This study followed a model with four stages suggested by (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Developing a plan for improvement, executing the plan, observing, and recording the results of the plan and reflecting on the results of the plan for further planning and informed actions.

Furthermore, it should be added that given that AR is likely to involve participants' reflections, attitudes, beliefs, points of view, quantification may be difficult or inappropriate. More appropriate is an attempt to produce a description which results in a detailed characterization of how the General English Syllabus (GES) can be improved through AR, how practitioners get involved, and what knowledge is produced throughout the process.

AR offers practitioners possibilities for understanding the syllabus design process from a comprehensive perspective, as it is the local concerns and problems of the research, which allow them to address syllabus issues through thoughtful inquiry (Zohrabi, 2014). AR seeks to provide practitioners with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit in with their own cultural context and lifestyles, allowing them - not only "the experts" to determine the nature and operation of the things that significantly affect their lives (Nasrollahi, 2015).

The first step of the model employed consists of developing a plan of critically informed actions to make improvements. This stage requires the researcher to comprehend the subject of study through the exploration, analysis and observation of persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions and feelings, as well as organizational functioning. Therefore, research techniques allowing participants to express their beliefs, attitudes and

opinions about the GES were entirely appropriate. Throughout this first step, NA methods were employed, since NA provides information that helps achieve greater understanding at school level (Brown, 2006).

The second step involves the implementation of the plan, which consisted of improving the GES in use into a School-Based Syllabus (SBS) based on the data gathered through the NA. The third step consists of observing the effects of the implementation of the plan. And finally, the fourth step is an analysis of the process of improvement.

The research is predominantly qualitative aiming to produce a rich description of the research participants and their environment. The main data sources were interviews with the participants. They were supplemented with a survey, two language tests, diaries and documents from the research site.

Research question

The main aim of the study is to investigate the design of a syllabus based on school needs within a context where the syllabus content is general English and the design process is top-down. It also aims to explore the characteristics of the General English Syllabus and how it can be changed to be School Based.

What are the characteristics of the General English Syllabus and what changes can be introduced to make it a School Based Syllabus?

How are they different from each other?

Answers to the questions will contribute to a better understanding of how a school-based syllabus design process can be followed within a specific context, where decision making has been centralized. Within the implementation of the school-based syllabus, potential challenges are likely to emerge and these could feed into further research projects in the future.

Research context and participants

The context in which this study was undertaken was that of a program of a Bachelor's Degree (BA) in Economics of Mexican Higher Education Institution. A group of voluntary teachers was invited to participate. It was a homogeneous group of Mexican teachers who have a BA in English, one of whom was male and three of whom were female. They provided value data concerning the internal realities of the teaching context, which helped gain understanding of how within the setting the issues surrounding the role of ELT (Khoshsima and Hashemi

Toroujeni, 2017).

To know student´s beliefs and opinions, a group of learners was invited to participate. It was conformed by 67 male and 60 female students, aged between 18 to 20 years. The general population of learners enrolled, from which the participants were drawn, is required by the Institution to study English as a foreign language, throughout their four years of University studies. The students must take an English examination as an entry requirement. The initial selection of student participants in the study was based on programme´s records of the students' performance on the entry test and the strengths and weaknesses of the learners regarding language knowledge.

Additionally, two Human Resource Managers were interviewed to know the language knowledge requirements, international companies established in the state of Colima set for the applicants.

Data gathering methods

The four data gathering strategies employed in the study were face-to-face individual and group interviews, a questionnaire, and a language test. One personal interview and two group interviews were carried out with language teachers. The interviews with the employers were both face-to face. All the interviews were conducted at different times and on different dates, according to the agendas of the participants. The reasons for choosing interviews were mainly because interviews are suitable for gaining an insight into the practitioners' individual and collective reflective enquiry as it was evolving during the process of the improvement of the syllabus (Richards, 2003).

The language test administered to the learners was an English practice test, produced by Cambridge English Assessment. The business English practice test targets learners who want to obtain a business-related English language qualification, and the level of the test corresponds to level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

As mentioned above, the primary selection of student participants in the study was based on the records the faculty had of the students' performance on the entry test, students' language knowledge. In other words, they were purposeful or purposive selected (Dörnyei, 2007). This is what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) refer to as 'lacks' (p. 55), what the learner knows or doesn't know about the language. One of the most viable method to find out is a language test (Hossain, and Ahmed, 2015).

The questionnaire administered to students consisted of four sections. Section one asked questions about personal beliefs about the language learning process, their motivations to learn, the teacher and their role in the learning process. Section two aimed to find out which aspects of language they felt they needed most help or practice with. Section three sought to discover their preferred ways of learning English and section four investigated their English learning background. Because section four intended to collect learners' background information, it was necessary to modify the format to a multiple choice one.

Results
Analysis of the General English Syllabus

The analysis of the GES was informed by literature on syllabus design as well as the experiences of the language teachers themselves. Sabbah (2018) suggests that a syllabus is a detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning elements, a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning. They also agree that a syllabus is made up of basic elements such as goals and objectives, sequenced content, teaching methodology and assessment.

The participating teachers found that the existing GES did not sufficiently clearly express the learning aims and outcomes for students. It seemed that the main purpose of the syllabus was for students to learn the grammar, vocabulary and functions of the language, but for no obvious practical reasons.

The objective of the lessons was to ensure that learners mastered the language content of the syllabus through the study of rules and sentence construction. The GES required learners to go through, and consciously understand, the rules underlying sentence construction; language learning was perceived as linear and sequential, starting with a first stage focus on input, teaching and output (Richards, 2013).

Under the approach of the GES, assessment was concerned with the administration of tests of grammar, functions and vocabulary over the respective terms of study, with the aim of giving students a numerical mark, to enable them to progress from one semester to the next, or to repeat a semester, if achievement was low.

The GES could not be implemented in the form that was originally conceived by the decision makers at the top of the hierarchy, because although it was directed at school teachers, it was not derived from school experience and experimentation and it was not in line with the institutional reality of the school, the needs of the learners and profiles of the teachers.

According to the description of syllabus types provided by White (1988), the GES could be perceived as matching the following types: product-oriented, where the focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should master as a result of instruction; Type A, where the language to be taught and learned is pre-determined by dividing it into small, isolated units; Formal, which prioritizes understanding of how the text of language is produced and organized; Synthetic, where the different parts of language are taught independently and progressively and the acquisition is a process of addition of parts until the whole structure of language has been put together.

The Language Test

The practice test which was administered to students totals 90 marks. Each skill (reading, writing, and listening) is worth 30 marks. Passing grades are Pass with Merit and Pass. The minimum grade for a Pass corresponds to about 65% of the possible total marks. Narrow Fail and Fail are both failing grades. Table 1 shows the performance achieved by participants on the business English practice test.

This section focuses on the analysis the researcher did of the results of a language test, with the intent to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the sample group in regards to language knowledge and skills. Table 1 below shows the grades achieved by learners.

Table 1. Grades achieved by learners in the practice test (N=127)

Grade	Frequency	Percent
Pass with Merit	1	0.7
Pass	21	16.6
Narrow Fail	48	37.8
Fail	57	44.9

Source: Own elaboration

Even though Table 1 reveals the levels of achievement of learners in relation to an international test such as business English practice test, the focus of this part of the study is to establish learners' current strengths and weaknesses with regard to English language knowledge and skills. Table 2 shows the learners' performance on each of the three tests: reading, writing and listening. The numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total.

Table 2. Learners' performance on the language test (N=127)

Grade	Listening	Reading	Writing
Pass with merit	93	98	93
Pass	53	74	98
Nearly fail	26	52	54
Fail	19	33	8

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2 reveals that students' strongest area is currently writing, followed by reading, while their weakest area is listening. The data shows those areas in which learners need to make progress, to achieve a more balanced performance across the skills. The value of the results of the language test is that it objectively reveals areas of opportunity which can be incorporated into the development of the improved language syllabus.

Students' opinions and beliefs about their language learning

Tables 3, 4 and 5 below show the results of a 52-item questionnaire administered to students. Brief descriptions of the results are provided below the tables. A number from 1 to 6 to each response option for scoring purposes was assigned, where 1 was strongly disagree and 6 was strongly agree, in sections one and three; whereas for section two, 1 meant not at all and 6 meant very much. Each table was divided in three groups, the same groups used to show the results of the language test earlier, Pass, Narrow Fail, and Fail. The numbers in the boxes are expressed as the weighted average. Table 3 below shows the results of Section 1, related to the respondents' personal beliefs about language learning and their motivations to learn.

Table 3. Shows section one of the questionnaire about learners' beliefs about the language learning process and their motivations to learn (N=127)

	Pass	Narrow Fail	Fail
1. English is a difficult language to be learned.	2.96	2.14	3.09
2. Learning English is important to me because I want to study in other countries.	5.45	5.68	5.58
3. I feel able to take up subjects taught through English.	5.36	4.62	3.68
4. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my university studies.	5.65	5.89	5.5
5. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my professional life.	5.93	5.86	5.7
6. I am confident about my ability to learn English successfully.	1.52	1.72	5.46
7. I have to pass an international exam if I want to graduate.	5.79	1.56	5.66
8. I like the atmosphere of my English classes.	4.94	6.52	5
9. My parents encourage me to study English and other foreign languages.	1.47	5.41	4.88
10. I am working hard to learn English.	4.74	5.08	4.92
11. My language success depends on what I do inside the classroom.	1.64	2.56	2.82
12. My language success depends on what I do outside the classroom.	2.55	2.56	2.96
13. My language success only depends on what only the teacher does in the classroom.	1.57	1.93	2.31
14. Business related subjects should be taught in English.	5.15	4.52	3.37
15. I study English only to have good marks.	2.34	2.31	2.62
16. English must be a compulsory subject.	4.87	4.83	4.86
17. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1.84	4.81	4.42
18. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	0.85	0.97	0.97
19. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	4.61	4.82	4.89

Source: Own elaboration

As shown above, Table 3, students from both the pass and the fail group remained indifferent towards the idea that English is a difficult language to be learned. Concerning students of narrow fail group, they disagreed with this claim.

One aspect that highlights the answers of the questionnaire is motivation. Students showed they had different types of motivation. This is a positive factor for the development of the language lessons because leaners with sufficient motivation can achieve a working

knowledge of an L2, regardless of their language aptitude or other cognitive characteristic. For example, for the great majority of the students of the three groups strongly agreed or agreed that English language was a vehicle that could help them achieve both personal and professional goals. The possibility of studying abroad, using English during their university studies, and considering the option of getting a good job opportunity are stimulating learning elements. Additionally, a great majority of participants of the three groups agreed that their parents have encouraged them to study English, which could be an additional favorable learning stimulation. Moreover, the fact that most of the students agreed that English ought to be a compulsory subject taught throughout their undergraduate degree and not only during their first four semesters shows that learners are motivated to learn. A big plus for learning English is that students sense the good atmosphere prevailing in the language class, as well as the fact that they want to study not only because they want to have a good mark, but also because they want to learn.

Students also showed that they were aware of the fact that the learning process implies they have to work both inside and outside the classroom, and that they do not have to depend only on what the teachers tell them to do.

The questionnaire results suggest that there were some contradicting beliefs. For instance, data shows that a great majority feels confident and motivated to learn; but only some of them agreed to follow courses of content area taught in English, which means that some of those learners who expressed feeling confident about their ability to learn English successfully did not feel entirely so. Table 4 below shows the results of section 2 related to the students' personal opinions about their language learning needs.

Table 4. shows section two of the questionnaire concerning students' personal opinions
about their language learning needs (N=127)

Items	Pass	Narrow Fail	Fail
20. Write English more.	4.03	1.94	4.49
21. Speak English more.	4.45	4.79	5.18
22. Read information about Economics.	4.53	4.77	4.91
23. Learn more vocabulary.	4.38	4.56	5.65
24. Understand foreign people when they speak to me.	3.58	4.33	4.97
25. Attend international conferences.	4.94	4.76	4.73
26. Learn grammar.	3.85	4.54	4.85
27. Pronounce better	3.64	4.49	4.81

Source: Own elaboration

Table 4 reveals that students of the three groups agreed in some items. In items 22 and 25, students of the three groups were inclined to agree about the same needs regarding their need of reading information about the field of Economics in English, and attending international conferences.

They also have different beliefs. For instance, 4.81% of students of the fail group agreed they needed to pronounce better while only 4.49% of group the narrow fail and 3.64% of the pass group believed the same. Another example is item 24, 4.97% of students of fail group agreed they needed to understand foreign people when they speak. 4.33% of the narrow fail group and only 3.58% of the pass group believed the same. A third example about the differences is item 26. 4.85% of students of the fail group agreed they believed they needed to learn grammar, while 3.85% of the pass group expressed the same feeling, students of the narrow fail group are closer to what the fail group believed. One more example about the discrepancies in the data is in item 21, 4.49% of the students of the fail group agreed that they needed to speak English more, 4.79% of the students of group of the narrow fail and 4.45% of the pass group believed the same. Items 20 and 23 show beliefs similar to these described before. Table 5 below shows the results of section three related to the students' personal beliefs about their preferred ways of learning English.

Table 5. shows the results of section three of the questionnaire related to the students'

personal beliefs about their preferred ways of learning English (N=127)

Items	Pass	Narrow Fail	Fail
28. Following a textbook.	4.39	4.12	4.15
29. Listening to others using English in class.	4.36	3.79	4.46
30. Listening to the teacher using English in class.	4.74	5.5	4.68
31. Listening to audio-recordings.	5.12	4.63	4.98
32. The teacher giving oral/written feedback.	5.15	5.35	5.29
33. Giving oral presentations.	5.29	5.18	4.82
34. Role-playing.	5.36	5.25	5.18
35. Doing project work.	4.75	4.88	4.46
36. Doing exams.	4.25	4.62	4.4
37. Taking part in language games.	4.61	4.8	4.98
38. Memorizing dialogues, expressions or passages.	3.66	4.22	4.24
39. Doing written assignments (short passages, reports, essays).	4.8	4.59	4.76
40. Reading silently in class for information.	4.25	4.54	4.09
41. Reading aloud in class.	4.91	4.54	4.42
42. Reading about a specific field.	5.44	5.38	5.03
43. Studying grammar rules.	5.15	5.15	4.86
44. Practicing pronunciation.	5.08	5.27	5.25
45. Using a computer.	4.52	4.86	4.59
46. Using dictionaries.	4.11	4.64	4.8
47. Having mistakes corrected.	5.15	5.29	5.26
48. Learning lists of vocabulary.	4.74	4.78	4.96
49. Working with the whole class.	4.36	4.43	4.62
50. Working in small groups.	4.57	4.37	4.48
51. Working in pairs.	4.5	4.65	4.56
52. Working individually.	4.87	5.06	4.66

Source: Own elaboration

Table 5 informs about students' preferred ways of learning, students displayed a similar percentage of agreement, more precisely, that they 'slightly agreed', 'agreed', or 'strongly agreed' on items: 30, 32, 36, 42, 43, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50 and 51.

There were a number of other items in which learners of two groups displayed similar preferences, but the students of the other group did not; for instance, items: 28, 29, 31, 33 34, 40, 41.

Less than half of the students agreed with the idea that memorization is a good language learning strategy. There was a high level of agreement among the three groups concerning

the importance of practicing pronunciation.

Discussion
Human Resource Managers' English is a requirement of the workplace

Both managers revealed that English was a job entry requirement, and candidates had to include an English certificate in their résumé indicating their language proficiency. One of the interviewees also said that besides the language certificate contained in their résumé, candidates also had to take a language test, which included writing, listening and speaking sections. Both managers remarked that the knowledge of English language was a factor which was decisive in the company's decision to employ the applicant; as stated in the following extract:

> In our company English is a decisive factor in the decision to choose an employee; there can be many capable graduates, but then that number greatly declines after evaluating their English language abilities. Thus, they can be very skilled in their area of expertise, but if they do not know English they are competing on unequal conditions, and it is very probable that they are excluded. (HRM1, English translation).

HRM 2 pointed out that English was not only an influential aspect to recruitment, but also to get a promotion, or to travel to other countries for training. He stated that all employees were constantly invited to take the language test known as TOEIC to renew their knowledge and skills. The following comment was made by the manager:

> The training and professional development department continuously invites employees to participate in different training activities, and one of this consists of either preparing for taking the TOEIC test or only taking it for a first time or a second in case the certificate has expired. (HRM2, English translation).

Both managers revealed that it was necessary to encourage employees to be up to date on English because the organization was not located in an English speaking country; thus they needed to be ready to use the language at any moment and in different situations.

Both managers revealed that situations where English was mainly used were moments in which employees had to read information about different areas of the company. They also said that the information could be written in different formats as well, and with different

purposes; as the managers stated:

> In the large majority of cases English is used to read different types of text for different purposes, for example a press release of the company, instructions to follow a new process, emails sent by colleagues from other countries. (HRM1, English translation)
>
> The situations in which we use English most frequently are when we read operating manuals, emails, information shared in forums or chats, and short texts the company publishes in a magazine. (HRM2, English translation).

The managers also mentioned that besides the reading of different documents employees usually interacted in a written form through emails, chats or forums. One of them said that occasionally they had to participate in video conferences held by workers located in other companies mainly from the United States. Both commented that very rarely people from other countries like India or the United States visited their companies to exchange experiences; as stated below:

> Very infrequently we are visited by coworkers from other companies located in other countries to exchange experiences of what we call successful practices. (HRM2, English translation)
>
> Occasionally, some of us have to participate in video conferences led by personnel from the United States. In rare cases, colleagues from abroad come to visit the company and we have to solve issues or requests or simply help them with anything they need. (HRM1, English translation).

One of the managers pointed out that depending on the language proficiency and the position of the employees in the company they could sometimes travel to other English speaking countries for training or to participate in working teams where they exchanged experiences, presented and discussed relevant information, analysed and solved different issues; as stated below:

> Depending on their English abilities some employees are appointed to go to other countries to receive training in specific fields or in the implementation of new procedures, systems or techniques; also to take part in inter-institutional working groups to improve current

practices. (HRM1, English translation)

The interviewees clearly defined that, even when written communication was predominant, employees sometimes needed to carry out talks with coworkers from other nations, and emphatically stressed that their command of the language could become a key factor of improvement in their professional lives.

General English Syllabus vs School Based Syllabus

The outline of the GES was not clear, as it did not include sections where essential information such as teaching objectives and learning outcomes, methodology and assessment of learning were organised. The layout of the SBS, on the other hand was better organised and provided appropriate sections where the course designers incorporated these essential elements.

The new elements contained in the SBS allowed both the designer and the reader to understand and follow it in a clear and understandable way. The fact that the SBS had a neat format, which was easy to read and understand was important, as it was a public document, freely accessible to anyone interested in reading it.

The GES does not state clear objectives; this gave rise to uncertainty among language teachers. On the contrary, the SBS set out clear objectives for each of three terms of the teaching course. The fact that the SBS has clear objectives also creates trust and certainty in stakeholders and favours accountability, which is often not very popular among teachers, but is something that everybody has to deal with. The fact that a syllabus has clear objectives could enable both the teachers and the institution to provide concrete evidence of improvement. Clear objectives do not only favour accountability, but also support change and improvement, because the outcomes of the course can be evaluated based on achievement descriptors; these can also highlight those specific areas where learners need to improve their language knowledge and skills. Another considerable difference between the GES and the SBS is that the objectives responded to the investigated needs of the learners.

For example, according to language teachers interviewed, the GES was just a list of contents of grammar and vocabulary. The content of the SBS, instead, corresponded more closely to the definition of English for Specific Purposes, than to the General English syllabus approach underpinning the GES.

Other advantages of the content of the SBS were related to variety. Students were exposed to a wide diversity of business-related topics, which covered a wide range of language aspects

to which the students were likely to be exposed to at the workplace. Besides the breadth of the language content covered, the topics and content of the syllabus were of current interest, and dealt with real-life situations. The content and the tasks were intertwined as they inherently belonged to the same topic, which helped learners to understand and to convey meaning effectively. The GES did not explicitly recommend any particular methodology, but according to the interviewed teachers, they followed a 'Presentation, Practice and Production' methodology, because their main aim was to cover the grammar and vocabulary content of the syllabus.

In contrast, the SBS followed a skills-based teaching methodology, as its main purpose was to teach a collection of specific competences in using the target language. Some of the tasks students had to do involved completing documents such as reports, questionnaires, planning, organizing information, role-play, as well as the development of learning strategies to read, to write, to listen to and to speak more effectively. Thus, even though the SBS did not include a specific statement concerning the methodology for the delivery of the course, it could be inferred from the content, and from the types of activities which learners would be required to do, that the methodology underpinning the syllabus was skills-based and task-based, which enable students to learn through the completion of different types of language tasks, such as listing, ordering and sorting, matching comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences. This change of approach improved the way teaching was implemented in the class.

Concerning assessment, the GES stated that it had to be continuous. It also provided the different percentages teachers had to award for the different assessed activities, such as homework, classwork and exams, but it did not provide any further details. The SBS did not provide in-depth guidance on assessment, either. It stated the percentages to be awarded for each assessment activity, but it did not give any more detailed information. However, they agree more with the teaching methodology adopted, in other words, students had to use the language to complete certain types of job-related tasks, such as designing a business blog (writing) and presenting it to the class (oral presentation).

The SBS was also an ESP syllabus, because it closely specified exactly students needed to know about the language and needed to do with the language, in order to successfully perform in target situations. A final characteristic of the SBS was that it was tasked-based. It emphasized social and problem-solving, fostering learners' needs and preferences in terms

of learning interests. The tasks learners had to accomplish provided a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners.

Challenges of a School Based Syllabus approach

The findings reveal that conducting NA can also entail a series of challenges, such as the lack of knowledge of NA approaches, research methodology and of how to carry out fieldwork on the part of the participants. Someone who aims to implement NA must understand the different NA approaches, in order to decide how best to proceed and to make the most appropriate decisions, in order to collect relevant data, coinciding exactly with the aims of the study. Similarly, teachers who do NA must have some knowledge of research methodology, as most of the activities they do involve research activities, such as administering questionnaires or conducting interviews, as well as processing data to develop relevant information. Knowledge of the research context is also advantageous in carrying out NA, because this can facilitate the implementation of the research activities and help researchers to take advantage of certain positive situations, or to avoid negative situations which they already know about in advance. In sum, being unaware of different factors related to the NA process, such as theoretical concepts, methodology and fieldwork could hinder the NA process. This implies that any teacher who aims to conduct a NA should be fully competent to carry out the work.

Another competence a teacher who aims to conduct NA should have mastered is the capacity to process data. Data gains value when it is properly processed and interpreted, which requires that the processor has, or develops, the knowledge and skills to do so. Not processing or interpreting the data appropriately, may lead to a loss of data value and thus a lack of positive effect on teaching and learning.

Another challenge may emerge for teachers, when they want to use data to feed into their language teaching syllabuses (Nunan, 1988). The main problem is that teachers need to be able to interpret the data and to transform it into teaching goals, content and activities. This implies that teachers should have a repertoire of resources (teaching methodologies and materials) at their disposal from which to draw. However, teachers do not always have access to resources and they have to draw from the resources they have at hand. The idea of involving teachers in syllabus improvement involves challenges, and teachers may encounter various problems related to the conditions established for the design process and a lack of the knowledge and skills needed to be carried out, while designing the curriculum.

Two other challenges which teachers mentioned were the lack of time available and the heavy workload. While their main activity is teaching, they also have to carry out other duties. Therefore, due to their heavy workload, they considered that doing other activities, such as conducting an investigation to enhance the curriculum, would probably be impossible, because they would not have the time to do it.

Conclusions

One of the main changes of the school-based syllabus is the use of information emerging from the school. To achieve this, NA methods resulted to be very useful for gathering subjective and objective information necessary to define the aims, content and methodology of the syllabus in order to satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of the Faculty of Economics.

Another considerable improvement is that teachers played a predominant role, as SBCD suggest. They did not just apply a syllabus prescribed from the top of the organizational hierarchy, but designed their own syllabus, supported by hard data and conclusions emerging from the needs of the school. Teachers analysed the results of the language proficiency test from the point of view of the learners' current language skills development, and not only from the perspective of the score. This allowed them to carry out a more thorough analysis of the situation, which, in turn, led to the enhancement of the language syllabus, as the teachers included specific content and teaching materials that helped to improve language learning in the areas of need that they had identified. Teachers also realised that collecting more data from other sources contributed to the improvement of the syllabus, since a language syllabus should comprise a lot more than only language content and therefore, other types of analyses could also help then to collect relevant data to enrich the syllabus. They engaged in a process of analysis and reflection leading them to make decisions and change based on local needs. They were able to move beyond their teaching routine and critically reflect on their practice, which enhanced their understanding of educational context, making them more active participants of the improvement of the syllabus.

Two completely new elements in the syllabus design process were both the opinion of the learners and the opinion of some potential employers. Data provided by learners helped to become aware of things that teachers had not paid attention to before, such as the fact that learners actually wanted to follow a course book, instead of using materials provided by the teacher. Also, they became more aware of the types of activities which learners think they

can do themselves, to improve the effectiveness of their language learning. Teachers suggested that finding out about students' beliefs about their own language learning changed the perspective they had previously had, in terms of appropriate content and teaching activities.

Another plus point is the opinion of the employers. The information provided by the potential employers helped teachers understand the authentic language and tasks learners needed to develop in order to deal with authentic situations within their possible future work environments. The results of the language test and the results of the communicative target situation analysis provided a clear picture of what the language learners' strengths and weaknesses were.

The investigation makes a contribution to the syllabus design process as practitioners modified their syllabus on the basis of NA. This generated opportunities for language teachers to get involved in the decision making process, as they used the data to improve their language syllabus and teaching materials. Making decisions about their language courses based on data provided by the teaching context allowed them to realise that successful teaching and learning can be supported by systematic search of information based on the school needs and not necessarily prescribed by external experts or top policy makers. This research makes a contribution to NA by conducting different analyses, which, in turn, complemented each other. Conducting a variety of needs analyses, helped further understand the decision making process should be fed by data coming from a range of sources, to have a comprehensive picture of the situation, and to try to integrate most of the elements into the syllabus to make the language course more suited to the teaching context, and more effective and efficient as a means of encouraging learning.

Further research

An interesting area of further research would be a longitudinal study of the effects of the new syllabus. The study could cover a wide range of areas such as teaching. There is a lot of potential for developing this key area. Some of the topics that can be studied are teaching methodologies. It would be interesting to find out what problems teachers are facing within their classrooms or what teachers can do to improve or change some of their teaching practices in order to improve teaching and the syllabus.

New NA could be made for other target situations such as new potential organizations where

students could either work or study. Results revealed that this research was limited to the data provided by two potential employers, but there are other organizations in the business area within Mexico or abroad, which could possibly hire English speaking graduates. Most significantly, new NA would be made for those educational organizations which the university has signed mobility agreements with, and which require students to communicate in English. Another relevant source of new research, which was not considered in this investigation, was learners who already took part in mobility programmes in institutions of English speaking countries, and former learners who are taking part of postgraduate programmes or who are already working. Information provided by learners who already took part in mobility programmes would be of considerable importance to finding out not only the communicative demands, but also other sociolinguistic elements inherent to the culture of the target situation. Learners taking part in postgraduate programmes could provide data which revealed those communicative demands characteristic of the educational context, and learners who were already part of a company which required them to communicate in English could bring up to date information concerning not only the language needed, but also other specific factors teachers need to know to design a course, such as how the language will be used, who the workers will use the language with, where the language will be used.

References

Abudu, A. M., & Mensah, M.A. (2016). Basic school teachers' perceptions about curriculum design in Ghana. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(19), 2222-288.

Balyer, A., Özcan, K., & Yildiz, A. (2017). Teacher empowerment: school administration roles. *Eurasian Journal of Education Research*, 17(70), 1-18.

Bay, E., Vural Ö. F., Kahramanoglu, R., Aydin Ask, Z. (2016). Teacher views on school-based curriculum development approach (an analysis of applicability in turkey). *Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences*, 13(34), 180-201.

Brown, J. D. (2006). Second language studies: curriculum development. In *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (pp. 102-110). Elsevier.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics. Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.

Elsaid Mohammed, A. S. & Salih Mohammed, N. H. (2018). Needs analysis in English for academic purposes: the case of teaching assistants at the university of Khartoum. *How*, 25(2), 49-68. https://doi.org/10.19183/how.25.2.409.

Graves, K. (2008). The language curriculum: a social contextual perspective. *Language Teaching* 41(2), 147–181. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004867.

Hernández-Fernández, J. & Rojas, J. (2018). English public policies in Latin America: looking for innovations and systematic improvement in quality English language teaching. British Council México. https://www.britishcouncil.org.mx/sites/default/files/rpd_publication.pdf.

Hitchcock, G., and Hughes, D. (1995). Research and the teacher (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Holliday, A. (1994). The house of TESEP and the communicative approach: the special needs of state English language education. English Language Teaching Journal, 48(1), 3-11.

Hossain, M & Ahmed, K. (2015). Language testing: an overview and language testing in educational institutions of Bangladesh. *Advances in Language Literacy Studies*, 6(6), 2203-4714. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.6n.6p.80.

Huizinga, T., Handelzalts, A., Nieveen, N. & Voogt, J. M. (2014). Teacher involvement in curriculum design: Need for support to enhance teachers' design expertise. *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 46 (1), 33–57. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/00220272.2013.834077.

Hutchinson, T., and Waters, W. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. Cambridge University Press.

Iwai, T., Kondo, K., Lim, D. S., J. Ray, G. E. Shimizu, H. & Brown, J. D. (1999). *Japanese language needs analysis*. Performance based testing committee department of East Asian languages and literatures university of Hawai'i at Manoa http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/NetWorks/NW13.pdf.

Jordan, R. R. (1997). *English for academic purposes: a guide resource book for teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

Kemmis, S., and McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.

Khoshsima, H. & Hashemi Toroujeni, S M. (2017). Context in English language teaching program: differentiating between Irani public schools and private institutes. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 2(1), 2503-1848. https://doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v2i1.35.

Marsh, C. J. (2009). *Key concepts for understanding curriculum* (4th ed). Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Nasrollahi, M. A. (2015). A closer look at using Stringer's action research model in improving student's learning. *International Journal of Current Research,* 7(7), 18663- 18668.

Nghihalwa, I. N. (2018). *Teachers' involvement in the planning and development of national curriculum for basic education in Namibia*. University of Eastern Finland. School of applied educational science and teacher education. https://epublications.uef.fi/pub/urn_nbn_fi_uef-20181250/urn_nbn_fi_uef-20181250.pdf.

Nunan, D. (1988). *Syllabus design*. Oxford University Press.

Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology*. Prentice Hall.

Rahman, M. (2015). English for specific purposes (ESP): A holistic review. *Universal Journal of Education Research,* 3(1), 24-31. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2015.030104.

Richards, J. C. (2013). Curriculum approaches in language teaching: forward, central and backward design. *RELC Journal,* 44(1), 5-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688212473293.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sabbah, S. S. (2018). English language syllabuses: definition, types design and selection. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(2), 127-142. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no2.9.

White, R. V. (1988). The ELT curriculum: design, innovation and management. Blackwell.

Zohrabi, M. (2014). Promoting teacher development through an interactive approach to curriculum development. *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences,* 98, 2025–2034. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.638.