FOREIGN LANGUAGE SYLLABUS DESIGN IN MILITARY EDUCATION

S. Jonakova, N. Mockova, F. Muto
University of Defence Brno (CZECH REPUBLIC)

Abstract
This paper presents a one-year project carried out at the University of Defence in 2018, which focused on designing new syllabi for intermediate-level language courses. We pursued a mixed-methodological approach, which ensured data collection from three distinct sources. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers preparing students in courses at the intermediate level. In the interviews, teachers were asked to identify their preferred textbooks. Based on the results, we performed content analyses on the teachers’ favourite textbooks. The acquired data were also supplemented with information from a questionnaire administered to the students at the end of the course in which they were asked to express their opinions on the contribution to the course from a grammar, vocabulary, and language skills point of view. Based on the findings as mentioned above, we selected the most suitable textbooks which became the basis for designing new syllabi.

As a result, we elaborated syllabi for intensive, refresher, upgrade and combined courses at the intermediate level. As the course participants have varying entrance levels of English language proficiency, a three-phase syllabus has been created for the intensive course (lower, intermediate, and higher entrance levels); two-phase syllabi have been created for refresher and upgrade courses (lower and higher entrance levels) and one syllabus for the combined course. Currently, the model syllabi are highly recommended to the teachers, as they enable the meeting of all requirements for final examinations in accordance with our unique set of NATO-prescribed language standards, known as STANAG 6001. Moreover, they provide ample space for teachers’ creative freedom.

Keywords: English language courses, syllabus design, military education.

1 INTRODUCTION
The Language Training Centre (LTC) in Brno, the Czech Republic, which is part of the University of Defence (UO), prepares military professionals as well as civilians working for the Army of the Czech Republic (ACR) for the examinations in accordance with STANAG 6001. This exam comprises tests required by NATO for its member states, and it focuses on all language skills.

The Centre runs different types of courses for elementary, intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, varying in length from 5 to 21 weeks depending on the level of the course. The participants enrolled are working adults in various job positions holding different military ranks and having completed different education levels. They range in age from 25 to 55 years old.

Students attending courses at the elementary level are expected to understand and produce simple, routine questions and answers as well as short phrases within familiar areas to meet immediate personal needs. They should be able to participate in simple, short conversations and e-mail exchanges. Nevertheless, the elementary level permits frequent lapses in both comprehension and production.

Students in courses at the intermediate level are required to understand and produce language for everyday and routine work-related matters as well as factual accounts of events and activities in the present, past and future. They are also required to give detailed descriptions of people and places and provide instructions and directions. Intermediate-level students are expected to use the language well enough to be generally understood.

Students in courses at the upper-intermediate level should understand and produce formal and informal language for most social and professional situations. They should produce well-structured language relating to abstract topics and hypotheses, including technical discussions in their field of specialization. They ought to make detailed arguments for and against different opinions. Repetition is rarely requested; speech has a natural flow without searching for words and is easily understood by native speakers.
In 2018 a brief survey was carried out in which the entrance test results of 108 students from 11 courses at the intermediate level were compared with their final STANAG 6001 exam results. This survey revealed that entrance test results are often unreliable for predicting achievement of the required results in all language skills on the examination in accordance with STANAG 6001 (see Figure 1). One of the possible reasons for this discrepancy may be the fact that the syllabi for particular courses were elaborated solely by head teachers without the cooperation of their colleagues. Subsequently, we decided to focus on designing model syllabi in order to help teachers plan course weekly schedules more effectively and make the selection of lesson content easier and in compliance with the exam requirements. Moreover, their flexibility enables teachers to tailor them to particular courses’ students’ needs.

![Figure 1. Evaluation of success in the STANAG 6001 exam.](image)

1.1 Defining syllabus and syllabus design

Traditionally, a syllabus is thought of as an organized statement of the content of what is to be learnt ([1], White 1988, p. 91). This viewpoint is advocated, for example, by Rogers ([2], 1989, p. 26), Ur ([3], 1996, p. 176) and Widdowson ([4], 2002, p. 127). Also in Graves’ view, a syllabus is a product of “conceptualizing content” ([5], 2000, p. 38) which involves considering what students should learn in the course, what decisions should be made about, what to include and emphasize and what to exclude. Conceptualizing content also includes arranging content in a way that facilitates decision-making about objectives, materials, sequence, and evaluation ([5], 2000, p. 37). Consequently, Graves views syllabus design as a component of course development ([6], 1996, p. 3). Richards defines a syllabus as the product of syllabus design; thus in his view, a syllabus design comprises the selection and organization of content ([7], 1990, p. 8).

In this respect, Prabhu states that the expression “what is to be taught” may refer either to what is to be done in the classroom or what is to be learnt as a result. Therefore, he perceives the syllabus as an operational construct concerned with procedures of teaching and such a syllabus is called a procedural one ([8], 1987, p. 86). The syllabus as an illuminative construct is concerned with the product of learning and is a specification of what is to be learnt in terms of a conceptual model which aims to provide an understanding of the nature of the subject area concerned ([8], 1987, p. 89).

Similarly, White makes a distinction between a content-based syllabus and a process-based syllabus wherein the content syllabus is based on a list of items to be learnt, whether these are grammatical structures, categories of communication functions, topics, themes or communicative skills ([1], 1988, p. 46). In the process-based syllabus, content is subordinate to the learning process and pedagogical procedure. The syllabus designer focuses more on “how” rather than “what,” and the basis for such a syllabus will be psychological and pedagogical rather than linguistic ([1], 1988, pp. 46 – 47). Thus, it represents a move from content to the processes of learning and the procedures of teaching ([1], 1988, p. 94).

Conceptions of the nature of a syllabus are related to views of language and second language learning. As a result of the more recent movement toward communicative theories of language and
language learning, syllabi are expressed more in communicative terms; structural, functional, notional, topical, situational, skills, or task-based syllabi are commonly found in current English as a second language courses and materials ([7], Richards 1990, p. 9). To what extent a particular syllabus is preferred depends on opinions about the nature of a foreign language as well as the nature of language learning ([6], Graves 1996, pp. 19-25; [9], Hutchinson and Waters 1987, pp. 85-88; [10], Nunan 1988, pp. 27-52; pp. 6-7; [11], Richards 2001, pp. 152-165; [12], Richards and Rodgers 2001, p. 21).

In practice, elements from different syllabus types are most often combined. Thus, the genuine issue is how to integrate several syllabi into a sensible teaching programme ([9], Hutchinson and Waters 1987, p. 89; [11], Richards 2001, p. 164).

1.2 Factors influencing syllabus design

Designing a syllabus requires knowing the level at which the course will start and the level learners may be expected to reach at the end of the course ([11], Richards 2001, p. 146; also see [6], Graves 1996, p. 17). The choice of a particular approach to content selection also depends on subject-matter knowledge, current views on second language learning and teaching, and convenience. Then “the sequencing of content involves deciding which content is needed early and which provides a basis for things that will be learned later” ([11], Richards 2001, p. 148-150). Sequencing is based on different criteria and may occur on the macro level of the course as well as on the micro level of a week or a unit or lesson within a course ([6], Graves 1996, p. 29; [11], Richards 2001, p. 150; also see [5], Graves 2000 pp. 125 - 141).

Syllabi formats differ in the number of items which they include. Some of them comprise only topics which will be taught, while the others consist of explicit objectives, content and process items, allocated time for teaching the content, recommended and supplementary materials ([3], Ur 1996, pp. 176 – 177).

Nevertheless, a syllabus can predict very little about what will be learnt as it only establishes an approximate statement of what will be taught ([9], Hutchinson 1987, pp. 84-85). Accordingly, working on syllabus design, teachers’ teaching skills and teaching styles should be taken into account because “what learners do is not directly determined by the syllabus but is a consequence of how the syllabus is methodologically mediated by the teacher in the pursuit of his own course of instruction” ([4], Widdowson 2002, p. 129; also see [7], Richards 1990, p. 10; [11], Richards 2001, pp. 216-217). Teachers have to make sense of what they are doing, not just doing it ([6], Graves 1996, p. 6).

It is also important to know who the learners are, the level of their entrance language proficiency, what they need to learn and for what purposes, and what motivates them as learners.

Although commercial textbooks will never perfectly fit a language programme ([11], Richards 2001, p. 257), they play an important role. As Graves states, a textbook provides a syllabus for the course and consistency within a programme across a given level if all teachers use the same textbook ([5], 2000, p. 174 - 176). As no textbook meets all the criteria for an actual group of students, it needs to be adapted to a certain extent. In this context, teachers are expected to be flexible and adapt and plan materials and classroom activities around the syllabus ([7], Richards 1990, p. 10).

2 METHODOLOGY

We pursued a mixed methodological approach which ensured data collection from three different resources.

2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in June 2018 in which 12 internal teachers of English preparing students in courses at the intermediate level took part. The teacher interviews included questions related to their preferred textbooks used in the courses, whether they were easily accessible for preparing lessons and whether preparation was time-consuming. Teachers were also asked if they preferred combining different textbooks in the lessons and how suitable the textbook content was from the standpoint of grammar, vocabulary, and language skills.

On the basis of the interviews, a list of the textbooks used was elaborated. In intensive and refresher courses, the following textbooks were used: New English File Pre-intermediate (NEF PIM), New
English File Intermediate (NEF IM), Straightforward Pre-intermediate (SF PIM), face2face Pre-intermediate second edition (F2F PIM), face2face Intermediate second edition (F2F IM), English File Pre-intermediate third edition (EF PIM), and English File Intermediate (EF IM). In upgrade courses, students were taught according to English Result Intermediate (ER IM), Talking Points (TP), and English File Intermediate (EF IM). In combined courses, teachers used English File Intermediate (EF IM), English Grammar in Use Pre-intermediate (EGU PI), English Vocabulary in Use Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate (EVU PIM, EVU IM).

All respondents stated that the above-mentioned textbooks were easily accessible for preparing lessons and the system of combining different textbooks was convenient. None of the respondents reported lesson preparation as being time-consuming, and all expressed appreciation for the ability to supplement their own teaching materials.

Concerning the content methodology, these textbooks were utterly suitable for language skills development as well as for language means development, as they entirely respect modern approaches to foreign language teaching.

All teachers strongly believed that the classes should be complemented with consultations. The most frequent perceived problems in the teaching and learning processes were related to students’ low level of entrance English proficiency. Thus, the teachers agreed on designing a three-phase syllabus for intensive courses, two-phase syllabi for upgrade and refresher courses and a single syllabus for combined courses.

During the interviews focused on whether the used textbooks were suitable from a content point of view, teachers agreed on carrying out a content analysis of their favourite textbooks in order to obtain relevant and complete data.

2.2 Textbooks analysis

Based on the handbook “Step by Step towards STANAG 6001 Exam in English”, (https://www.unob.cz/cjv/Stranky/prirucka_ke_zkousce.aspx), three questionnaires were constructed in July 2018. The transparent nature of the exam goals and objectives, which are there delineated, allowed us to focus on specific analysis criteria, which included topics, vocabulary, functions, grammar, and productive and receptive language skills. Based on the requirements stated in the handbook, the first questionnaire included 56 grammar items, from which 47 were determined for active acquisition and 9 for passive acquisition. The second questionnaire comprised of 11 writing tasks and 33 speaking tasks. The teachers were also asked, in each unit of the analysed textbook, to put down numbers of exercises focused on listening comprehension and reading comprehension development (but only exercises accompanied with tasks). The last questionnaire consisted of 40 topics, from which 9 were the military ones.

The questionnaires were considered by three colleagues teaching in language courses at the intermediate level and then circulated in the electronic form among the teachers who had participated in the interviews. The analysis of 9 preferable teachers’ textbooks was completed by the end of August 2018, and the acquired data were processed and illustrated in diagrams in September 2018.

As shown in Figure 2, the textbooks Straightforward Pre-Intermediate (SF PIM), New English File Intermediate (NEF PIM), English Result Intermediate (ER IM) and English File Pre-Intermediate (EF PIM) are entirely suitable for language skills development as to successfully pass the exam at the intermediate level.

Straightforward Pre-Intermediate (SF PIM), New English File Intermediate (NEF IM), English File Intermediate (EF IM) and face2face Pre-Intermediate second edition (F2F PIM) include in comparison to the other textbooks a higher number of topics (see Figure 3).
Figure 2. Total number of exercises focused on all skills.

Figure 3. Number of topics in particular textbooks.

Figure 4. Numbers of grammar items in particular textbooks.
As illustrated in Figure 4 above, the highest number of grammar items determined to active and passive acquisition is contained in the textbooks New English File Intermediate (NEF IM) and English File Intermediate (EF IM).

From the completed analysis, it is evident that regarding the STANAG 6001 exam specificity, none of the analysed textbooks meets the teachers’ requirements for developing productive and receptive language skills as well as the active and passive acquisition of grammar items in the way of profound preparation for the exam at the intermediate level. Moreover, these textbooks suffer from a lack of specific topics necessary for this level.

Consequently, based on this content analysis, Essential Grammar in Use, English Grammar in Use, English Vocabulary in Use Pre-Intermediate & Intermediate, Campaign 2, Breakthrough, Command English, Destinations B1, Talking points, Active Listening, Listening +, Real Listening, Listening Extra were recommended as supplementary instructional materials.

### 2.3 Courses evaluation from students’ point of view

The acquired data were supplemented with data from a questionnaire administered to the students at the end of the course in which they were asked to express their opinions on the contribution to the course from a grammar, vocabulary, and language skills point of view. We utilized the official evaluation questionnaire distributed to students at the end of the courses in which students have an opportunity to evaluate the course content sufficiency from a grammar, vocabulary, and language skills point of view with marks from 1 to 5 (1 – the most satisfied, 5 – the least satisfied).

With respect to the fact that different types of courses were of a different length and the students were taught according to different types of syllabi, the data acquired were assessed separately for each course.

The data were collected from 15 courses which were run from September 2017 to July 2018. Seven English intensive courses (IK) lasted approximately 16 weeks, one combined course (KK) for 10 months (contact lessons 1 week a month at the university and 3 weeks of self-study), 4 refresher courses (UK) and 3 upgrade courses (ZK) lasted for 7 weeks each. There were 10 students in each course; the questionnaires were completed by 134 students out of 150.

![Figure 5. Course evaluation from students’ point of view.](image)

Nevertheless, this questionnaire constructed by the Testing Department of the University of Defence lacked questions for explanations as to why the students were evaluating the attended courses that way. For this reason, the acquired data have only an insufficient informative value and they may be...
considered to be quite subjective (see Figure 5). Our teaching experience shows that substantial subjectivity of course assessment often depends on students' entrance level of English which influences their expectations about the course, for example, which language skills they would like to improve primarily, and which means of language they would like to practise most. In some cases, dissatisfaction with the course may also stem from students' overall discontent with their results during the course.

3 RESULTS

Based on the preliminary findings stated above, we elaborated syllabi for intensive, refresher, upgrade and combined courses at the intermediate level. As the course participants have varying entrance levels of English language proficiency, a three-phase syllabus has been created for the intensive course (lower, intermediate, and higher entrance levels); two-phase syllabi have been created for refresher and upgrade courses (lower and higher entrance levels) and one syllabus for a combined course.

Textbooks provided a strong basis for developing the syllabi, thus for intensive courses Straightforward Pre-Intermediate and New English File Intermediate were selected for a lower entrance level; English File Pre-Intermediate and New English File Intermediate for an intermediate entrance level and New English File Intermediate with supplementary commercial materials for a higher entrance level. As for upgrade courses at a lower entrance level, New English File Intermediate was selected, and the same textbook was chosen for a higher entrance level, but it was complemented with other commercial books. New English File Intermediate became the core textbook for refresher courses at a lower entrance level and face2face Intermediate for a higher entrance level. The syllabus for combined courses was designed on the basis of New English File Intermediate.

As students are required to carry out the exam in accordance with STANAG 6001 at the end of the courses, we had to develop syllabi to meet the exam requirements. Therefore, the syllabi are product-oriented and teacher-led. In conceptualizing content, we focused primarily on language. We specified grammar and topics, recommended and supplementary materials, and the length of the course (see Table 1). The syllabi are enriched by a detailed description of functions related to the selected vocabulary and topics (see Table 2); also grammar determined for active and passive acquisition is presented in detail. Moreover, the syllabi state the level at which the tasks should be accomplished and they are organized on the micro level of a week. With respect to the required final examination, the syllabi are integrated ones, combining elements from structural, functional/task-based, and topic-based syllabi.

The syllabi are intended to provide guidance and support. Therefore, they reflect philosophical assumptions of teachers who work according to them as they favour communicative language teaching and learning. We also assume that teachers are creative in using the textbooks and are able to modify tasks and activities to be relevant to students' needs. In addition, the teachers are expected to supplement the textbooks with their own materials.

Table 1. Syllabus sample for an intensive course at a lower entrance level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Materials used</th>
<th>Number of hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Present tenses</td>
<td>Personal information Family and friends</td>
<td>Straightforward Pre-intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past tenses</td>
<td>School days</td>
<td>Essential Grammar in Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>English Vocabulary in Use Pre-intermediate/intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skill focus: listening, speaking, reading and writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Countable/</td>
<td>Home, house, town</td>
<td>Straightforward Pre-intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>uncountable nouns</td>
<td>Skill focus: listening, speaking, reading and writing</td>
<td>Essential Grammar in Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantifiers</td>
<td></td>
<td>English Vocabulary in Use Pre-intermediate/intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present tenses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Present perfect</td>
<td>Work/My job</td>
<td>Straightforward Pre-intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skill focus: listening, speaking, reading and writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Essential Grammar in Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English Vocabulary in Use Pre-intermediate/intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Complement to the Syllabus sample for an intensive course at a lower entrance level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal biography</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>Inviting someone to a family event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/Friends</td>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>Politely accepting/refusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relations</td>
<td>Greetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description of people</td>
<td>Describing/comparing people (appearance, personality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditions</td>
<td>Asking for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Professional career</td>
<td>Asking for a job/position/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Future plans</td>
<td>Asking for a place on a course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School education</td>
<td>Apologizing for being late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(types, subjects, likes, dislikes)</td>
<td>Asking superior for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting/giving information (course abroad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Location/directions</td>
<td>Arranging to rent a house/flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places to live</td>
<td>Flat/house description</td>
<td>Arranging to buy a house/flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(town/village)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Complaining about a flat/house/neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving directions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, a syllabus is a written statement of what is to be learnt during a course, as well as the selection, organization, and contextualization of the educational materials to be used in it. Course syllabi are not intended to be a substitute for teachers’ flexibility, experience and intuition, but rather an outline that benefits instructors and students by explicitly stating objectives, clarifying expectations and establishing the scope and sequence of a course. Furthermore, in many educational settings, the syllabus should be informed by and aligned with an established set of standards. In the case of our workplace, the specifications have been put forth by NATO and are contained in the STANAG-6001 scale, which is also used to evaluate our students upon course completion in a high-stakes examination. In other educational contexts, the guidelines could be the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFR), or other national, regional or local norms.

The selection and implementation of educational materials is an essential part of the syllabus design process. Commercially available textbooks, while not able to satisfy all the needs of a language course, nonetheless provide an accessible and convenient tool. We have striven to analyse different textbook programmes to identify the ones which would be most beneficial to our students through an empirical, data-driven investigation. Rather than mandating that our teachers use a particular textbook, we have endeavoured to get teachers’ input so that the selection of materials becomes a department-wide effort.

Our students are adult learners facing high-stakes language examinations which may determine their future career prospects and income potential. We feel that we owe them a carefully conceived, clearly stated list of requirements and expectations which are expressed in the course syllabus.

REFERENCES


