

## Teacher's Course Syllabus: Academic Routine or Personal Desire

**Widad S. Shakir (Assistant Professor)**

**College of Languages- Salahaddin University- Erbil**

**sewda98@rocketmail.com**

**doi: 10.23918/vesal2019.a17**

### ABSTRACT

Course syllabus is obviously an important tool in university teachers' academic life. Teachers usually vary in their aim in preparing their syllabus as viewing it as an academic routine or being teachers' desire admitting its importance in teaching. The researcher predicted that not all teachers regard preparing course syllabus as a routine but there are teachers who believe in its importance as part of their teaching. The researcher used a questionnaire and was addressed to university teachers to fill it out to investigate their views and to detect the disadvantages teachers find in course syllabus and the influence of those disadvantages on their viewpoints. The results revealed that there are really teachers who believe in its importance to rely on in teaching and prepare it without being asked to, not influenced by the disadvantages of the course syllabus. It concluded that course syllabus is important in university teachers' life and teachers rely on it in their teaching and that they cannot dispense with it despite its disadvantages.

**Key words:** Course Syllabus, Importance of Course Syllabus, Motives for Syllabus. Disadvantages of Course Syllabus

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Course syllabus is an important part that contributes to the structure of higher education and it is used as a "planning tool" for the teachers and it plans the course for the students (Fink, 2012, p1). The word syllabus comes from "syllibos" of Greek origin which means "table of contents" (Das, 2012, p 1).

Center for Teaching Excellence CTE (2019, Para.1&2) also admits that course syllabus is an important part in higher education and this importance is apparent from the definition given to it stating that "The syllabus is a small place to start bringing students and faculty members back together(Cited in Sharon Rubin, 1985, p.5 ). This means that course syllabus is important and it contributes to the success of the semester actively. Moreover, CTE (2019) states that the syllabus acts as a "map" that directs the teacher to end the course effectively (para. 3).

There are some other definitions of course syllabus. According to Sbach (2016 para.2) a syllabus can be defined as a paper that communicates knowledge of the class. More importantly, it is stated that the syllabus at university is regarded as instructors' "passport for success"(" What's in a Syllabus and Why Does it Matter?", 2019, para.1). Due to the importance of course syllabus, teachers have to prepare their course syllabus before the course starts (Sbach, 2016, Para.1).

In a syllabus the following points should be included: teacher's biography and means of contact with the teacher i.e. e-mail address or telephone number,

through which students can contact their teachers, course description, the topics the teacher is going to cover during the course or during the academic year, the principles of the university, the aim of the course, grading policies, assignments and course schedule (Sbach, 2016 para.2).

Lots of syllabi do not contain certain necessary points. Some points should be included in teacher's syllabus such as the aim, the reason of taking the course, its appropriateness in the educational program, explaining the order in which parts of the syllabus is organized, explaining the purpose of the assignments, and what should the teacher test (CTE, 2019, para.2).

The syllabus presents a summary of what topics are going to be taught during the academic year or during the course. The topics are arranged in sequence. Sometimes the syllabus is replaced by "course book". The syllabus helps the teacher decide what to be covered during the year, but at the same time it would be a load on the students if the content is not what they are in need of (Scrivener, 1994 P.147).

The positive influence of the syllabus should be highly appreciated. The syllabus is the tool which identifies the points expected from the course. It presents the necessary "information" in regard of tests, marks and sources ("The Importance of Reading the Course Syllabus", 2019, para.1).

Students' appreciation of the course would be through the syllabus. It is not correct to believe that students' understanding of taking a course is clear, or to know what they are required to do, so course syllabus is of great importance in this regard (CTE, 2019, para. 2).

Students have to have a look at the syllabus to know the instructor, the aim, what is needed for the course and other kinds of information (Sbach, 2016, para.3). Therefore; students are required to read the syllabus carefully and remember the expected time for tests, assignments and papers and read the syllabus to be ready for the subject that is to be explained later (CTE, 2019, Para.3).

Fink (2012, p 2) mentions that course syllabus is necessary to be handed to students to write down any information added by the teacher and it should be given to students on the first day the course starts. Instructors all agree that course syllabus is useful and students benefit from the "course plan" (p 3).

The importance of a good syllabus is felt in its impressing the students by letting them feel the amount of work you used in designing the syllabus in order to make them learn about the course and in caring for your course. While a bad course syllabus will make your students feel that your information is not deeply thought of which means that the course is of poor quality. In addition, a syllabus can "set a tone" how your students will interact with you. The students will be encouraged to ask you for more information if the syllabus is written in a friendly way (Sbach, 2016, para.3).

What Farrell and authors like Scrivener, Richard and Chastain say about writing lesson plan can be said about writing course syllabus since both of them imply planning. Accordingly, it is stated that there are two motives which push university teachers to write course syllabus; "internal" and "external" (Farrell, 2002, pp30-38)

Concerning internal motive, teachers write course syllabus because they themselves benefit from the syllabus, they will have self-confidence, they would have control over the subject, know the difficulties that face them, and have the lesson move in a smooth manner (Farrell, 2002, pp. 30-38). In other words they "create" it willingly as a successful "tool" for their teaching (Taylor, 2017 p.1).

Teachers who have external motives for preparing course syllabus means that they do it as a routine that is required by the administrators and in particular by Quality Assurance Committee (Farrell, 2002, pp. 30-38 & Taylor, 2017, p. 1).

Cox (1994, p. 16) states that teachers usually write their course syllabus without being asked by their administrators, though it has become more necessary than before because of the increase in the number of students and caring for good teaching.

Having experience in teaching for a long period of time, old teachers are excused for not writing their course syllabus while "novice" ones should follow theirs lest they forget and miss the aim of the lecture and sometimes they have to write their syllabus again because they are unable to cover all the material (Chastain, 1988, p.336 & Richards, 2015, 178).

Teachers can teach a lesson very effectively without course syllabus, but preparing it is helpful for the teacher to have an idea about what he is going to teach and to provide more chances for the teacher to respond immediately to any unexpected events that may take place. Teachers should admit that writing a syllabus is “a thinking skill”. It involves predictions, anticipation, sequencing, organizing and simplifying”. (Scrivener, 1994, p. 123).

Fink (2012, p 1) states that although educators universally agree on the necessity for course syllabus in colleges (Cited in Doolittle& Siudzinsla, 2010, p 30), course syllabus has advantages as well as disadvantages (Das, 2012-2013, pp. 1-6).

Advantages of course syllabus can be summarized in giving an idea about the material being taught, what the students are required to carry out, the way students are going to learn ( Das, 2012- 2013, pp 1-6). All in all, course syllabus is to the advantage of students and of teachers as well. It is useful in organizing classroom, i.e. class management. Students will also be able to contact their teacher via stored “contact information” when facing difficulties (Taylor, 2017, p. 2& 3).

Course syllabus has also disadvantages; the contents of the syllabus are to

be covered in a limited time “frame” as it is stated by Yunita (n. d) that one of the difficulties facing teachers is not having enough time to cover the material of the syllabus, certain topics are to excluded (Das, 2012- 2013, pp. 1-6). Richards (2015, p.184) states that such changes in the syllabus include for example discarding an “activity” due to the lack of time or adding an activity as a filler, adding an activity for the purpose of motivation or drop an activity if it is beyond students’ level. Tabari (2013, pp. 869-873) also claims that the teacher has to change his syllabus due to problems s/he faces such as not covering the material that the teacher intends to cover, mismatch between the topics of the syllabus and the time of the course and the existence of unreal subjects. The teacher has to change his syllabus by omitting some material or rewriting it taking into consideration the time devoted for the course. In addition to what was mentioned Das states that the prerequisites of the syllabus is not desired neither by the teacher nor by the students (2012-2013, pp. 1-6).

Though teachers are required to write their syllabi, they do not have to stick to their syllabi blindly because there are unexpected situations that take place and therefore they have to adjust their syllabi in accordance with the lecture while it is in progress. (Richards, 2015 p. 184)

To solve the problem of old syllabi, universities try to modify their syllabi rapidly and this complicates the challenges for teachers and students as well (Das, 2012- 2013, pp. 1-6).

The researcher predicted that despite being required by administrators to create course syllabus, there are teachers who create their syllabi willingly even if not asked to and admitting the importance of the syllabus. The researcher tried to find the relation between teachers’ viewpoint and the noticeable disadvantages of course syllabus. As no previous studies investigated university teachers’ viewpoint in this regard, this study tried to tackle this area to arrive at the desired results aiming at pinning down the relation between university teachers’ viewpoint and the influence of those disadvantages they find in course syllabus on their viewpoints.

## 2. THEORY

The researcher’s prediction was that teachers’ preparing course syllabus is not only to fulfill a duty that is required by Quality Assurance Committee but there are also teachers who admit the importance of course syllabus and they prepare it willingly even if not asked to do so. The paper also tried to find out whether the disadvantages of course syllabus influence university teachers’ point of view in preparing their course syllabus.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

To collect data on university teachers’ viewpoint regarding organizing course syllabus, the researcher conducted a questionnaire and university teachers were asked to fill it out. The items on the questionnaire are adapted from the sources used in the research and from the researcher’s experience in teaching. The questionnaire was filled out by teachers from four colleges of Salahaddin University-Erbil.

### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

Teachers from four colleges of Salahaddin University participated in filling out the questionnaire. Twenty five teachers from each of the Colleges of Languages, Arts, Science and Engineering participated in filling out the questionnaire, i.e. the total number of the teachers was one hundred. Among the teachers, three of them were members of Quality Assurance Committee.

### 3.2. MEASURE

The result of the questionnaire was the source of the information that was needed in analysing the teachers' opinions of the topic that was investigated. A five scale response was used starting from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree next to the eight items that were listed on the questionnaire.

### 3.3. PROCEDURE

To implement the research, the researcher distributed the questionnaire with the help of the departments and/or the deanery to the teachers at the Colleges of Languages, Arts, Science and Engineering. The researcher clarified the items that were not clear to them. The Kurdish version of the questionnaire was given to those who did not understand the English one. Filling out the questionnaire needed 5-10 minutes on average.

### 4. RESULTS

The researcher predicted that there are teachers who believe in the importance of course syllabus; therefore, those teachers prepare their syllabi willingly even if not asked to by administrators. In general, university teachers admitted the importance of course syllabus in teaching (Table 1), though they admit at the same time that course syllabus is not read by the majority of their students and that most of the teachers are unable to cover all the topics of the syllabus because of missing several class meetings. Being an important tool of teaching, course syllabus, as teachers think, should be prepared by novice teachers and experienced ones as well.

**Table 1 Questionnaire results for university teachers on course syllabus**

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Writing course syllabus is very important to rely on in my teaching.	48%	43%	2%	5%	2%
2. Students read my course syllabus carefully to know what is expected from them.	5%	20%	13%	44%	18%
3. It is impossible to stick to the syllabus accurately.	13%	44%	2%	35%	6%
4. Students' skipping the lecture make the teacher unable to cover the topics listed in the syllabus.	34%	49%	2%	12%	3%
5. It is my desire to write course syllabus to guide me in teaching.	26%	48%	8%	15%	3%
6. The teacher is obliged to include unauthentic topics to make up for missed class meetings.	6%	31%	20%	31%	12%
7. Students rarely refer to course syllabus.	33%	46%	8%	10%	3%
8. I think experienced teachers do not need writing course syllabus.	7%	17%	10%	45%	21%

## 5. DISCUSSION

The researcher's prediction about teachers' belief in the role course syllabus plays in guiding teachers is highly supported by the results of the questionnaire. Among the one hundred university teachers, 91% of them agreed on the importance of course syllabus in teaching at university (item 1). This is what was manifested at the beginning of the paper by describing course syllabus as planning tool or regarding it as instructors' passport for success (Fink, 2012, p.1 & "What's in a syllabus...", 2019, para1). Yet 25% of them agreed that students read the syllabus carefully (item 2) while 62% disagreed to have their syllabus read carefully by students (item 2). The difficulty of following course syllabus accurately (item 3) received 57% of the respondents. This item is supported by Yanita (n.d. Abstract) who regards this point as one of the disadvantages of course syllabus. This is so because usually students (at Salahaddin University) skip lectures during the days any examination is going to be taken and also when students have oral examinations or graduation research examination. This case of skipping lectures reflects negatively on the covering of the topics included in the course syllabus (item 4). For these reasons we see that teachers responded with the rate of 83% in their disability to cover the topics listed in the course syllabus. This resulted in including some unauthentic topics to make up for the lectures not attended. By unauthentic is meant that unimportant topics are included (which can be skipped) lest students miss important material while skipping lectures. This will also result in changing the syllabus continuously as claimed by Tabari (2013, pp. 869-873) and Das (2012- 2013, pp. 1-6). The rate of agreement to this item was 37% while the rate disagreement was higher than that and was 43% (item 6). This rate (37%) indicates that those teachers would skip the missed topics without explanation or students stick to the university calendar accurately without skipping lectures. The percentage of teachers preparing course syllabus as personal desire (item 5) was 74% which is a satisfying rate and was not expected to be so high while only 18% disagreed to this item which means that they prepare their course syllabus as an academic routine because it is required from them by administrators. Concerning exempting experienced teachers from writing course syllabus, 66% of the teachers disagreed to this item (item 8) which implies the necessity of preparing course syllabus for novice teachers and experienced ones as well.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Reviewing the research, it is noticed that the prediction that was made by the researcher was supported by the results of the questionnaire that was conducted. Nearly all the university teachers who participated in filling out the questionnaire highly appreciated the role of course syllabus in guiding teachers in their profession and a noticeable number of them are willing to prepare their course syllabus even without being required by administrators because they regard it a map which directs them. We conclude that the weak points teachers find in course syllabus do not make them discouraged from writing course syllabus and besides that, the majority of the teachers believe that using course syllabus is not only useful for novice teachers but for experienced ones as well.

### References

- Chastain, K. (1988). *Developing second language skills: Theory and practice*. (3rd ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). (2019). The importance of the course syllabus. Retrieved 8/1/2019 from <http://www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/importance-of-the-course-syllabus>
- Cox, B. (1994). *Practical pointers for university teachers*. London: Kogan Page Limited
- Das, J. (2012-13). "Role of syllabus in higher education: A critical study". *Global Research Methodology Journal*, Vol- II, 7th issue, Retrieved 18/1/2019 from [www.grmglaranya.com](http://www.grmglaranya.com)
- Farrell, Th. S. C. (2002). Lesson planning. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Reynandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp.30-38). United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Fink, S. B. 1/1 (2012). "The many purposes of course syllabi". Retrieved 25/1/2019 from <https://www.syllabusjournal.org/syllabus/article/viewFile/161PDF>
- Richards, J. C. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. United Kingdom: Cambridge university press
- Sbach, J. M. (March 7, 2016). The importance of a syllabus. Retrieved 9/1/ 2019 from <http://dl.sps.northwestern.edu/blog/2016/03/the-importance-of-a-syllabus>
- Scrivener, J. (1994). *Learning teaching: The essential guide to English language teaching*. (3rd ed). A. Underhill (Ed.). MACMILLAN.
- Tabari, A. G. (July, 2013). Challenges of language syllabus design in EFL/ESL contexts, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4, 4, 869-873. Retrieved 25/1/2019 from [www.academypublication.com](http://www.academypublication.com).
- Taylor, K. (September 29, 2017). The advantages of a course syllabus. Retrieved 19/1/2017 from <https://classroom.synonym.com/the-advantages-of-a-course-syllabus-12586842.html>.
- The Importance of Reading the Course Syllabus. (2019). Retrieved 14/1/2019 from <https://www.eastfieldcollege.edu/pc/scholother/scholarship>.
- What's in a Syllabus and Why does it Matter? (2019). Retrieved 25/1/2019 from <http://ssd.umich.edu/article/what-s-syllabus-and-why-does-it-matter>
- Yunita, R. (n. d.). The Problems of Implementing Syllabus Faced by the Teacher at MTS Negeri Kepanjen. (Abstract). Retrieved 25/1/2019 from <https://www.researchgate.net/>