

## Using the Syllabus as an ESL Oral Fluency Activity

by [Richard R. Day](#)

When international students enter their first courses in ESL at the university level, they have to make rapid adjustments to a very unfamiliar academic environment. One of the first differences may be the course syllabus. In fact, it could be the first time that international students have seen a course syllabus.

When the teacher passes out hard copies of the course syllabus, and then goes over it with her or his students, asking for questions, and so on, the students may not understand either the document itself or its importance. Generally, a course syllabus sets out the learning outcomes or objectives, the requirements, important deadlines and dates, topics and readings, and grading and policies (plagiarism, class absences, etc.). All students, then, need to have a solid understanding of the course syllabus. An understanding of and appreciation for the course syllabus will be a benefit to the international students in their academic studies.

One way of helping students at the university level gain an appreciation for and understanding of the role of the course syllabus is to introduce it as an activity. This article describes how this can be done through an oral fluency activity.

### Purposes of the Activity

The purposes of the activity are:

- to help ESL students gain an appreciation for and understanding of the course syllabus,
- to provide opportunities for ESL students to engage in purposeful listening,
- to allow ESL students to engage in meaningful interactive communication,
- to introduce ESL students to working in small groups, and
- to begin to develop a learning community.

### Procedure

When using this activity, here are the general steps:

#### 1. Reflection

At the first meeting of the course, before handing out the course syllabus, instruct the class to think about the course. After a short period of reflection, ask the students to jot down on a piece of paper three or more questions about the course (e.g., What are the course requirements? Will there be a final examination?). Explain that the focus of their questions should be on the course, and not to worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so on.

#### 2. Group Work

Next, place the students into small groups of three or four and ask them to discuss their list of questions. Their task is to make a single list of questions (no more than five) for their group. Each group then selects one person to write their questions on the board. Ask the student from the last group to write on the board to erase, with the help of classmates, all of the duplicate questions, and then go over the questions as a class to make sure that everyone understands all of them.

### **3. Read the Syllabus**

Tell the class that you will read the syllabus. Instruct them to listen for answers to the questions on the board, and point out that perhaps not all of the questions may be answered. They may take notes as you read. Read the syllabus, trying to speak at a normal rate, and emphasizing important aspects. Depending on the level of the class, you may want to read the syllabus a second time.

You can vary this step depending on two factors: the length of the syllabus and the listening proficiency of the students. If the syllabus is more than 500 words (or two pages, double-spaced) and if the students' listening comprehension is intermediate or lower, then consider presenting it as a lecture and scaffolding with PowerPoint slides. When preparing the slides, be careful not to put all of the information verbatim on the slides; you want to avoid turning the activity into a reading exercise. Generally, put the major headings on the slides and then go into detail and discuss them in your lecture.

### **4. Answer the Questions**

The students return to their original groups and compare and discuss their answers to the questions. While they are still in their groups, reread the syllabus, and have the students revise their answers as a group.

### **5. Discuss as a Class**

Go over the answers with the entire class. Discuss which questions were answered and which were not. As appropriate, draw a distinction between those answers which were found directly in the syllabus and the answers by inference. In addition, if important elements of the syllabus were not covered (e.g., due dates of assignments), make sure to discuss them.

### **6. Conclude the Activity**

Conclude by asking the students, in their groups, to discuss what they learned from the activity.

This activity can easily be adapted for use in EFL academic preparation programs in EFL students' countries to prepare them for syllabi when they enter universities abroad.

## **Conclusion**

This activity gives ESL students an appreciation for and understanding of the role of the course syllabus in a university setting. It also gives ESL instructors insights into their international students' awareness of the course syllabus and their concerns about the course. Further, the activity introduces international students to small group and whole class discussions. Finally, the activity helps ESL instructors gain an understanding of the listening ability of their students.

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**Richard R. Day**, PhD, professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawaii, is the author of numerous publications. He is the coauthor of *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*, and the coeditor of *Extensive Reading Activities*

*for Teaching Language*. His most recent publications are *New Ways in Teaching Reading* (2nd edition) and *Teaching Reading*. He is the coeditor of the online scholarly journal, *Reading in a Foreign Language*.