

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SYLLABI FOR THE STUDY OF ENGLISH IN CONFORMITY WITH THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE

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Abstract:

This article highlights the need for teacher development syllabi to strike a balance between theory and practice, suggesting, in fact, that this is the primary goal of all teacher development programs. There is an investigation of the teachers' role in the syllabus, of the ways in which it is put into practice and of the extent to which syllabi constitute a point of reference for both teachers and learners as regards English language acquisition. The questionnaires used in this study were meant to explore how teachers implement the syllabi in their teaching, to find out how different teachers in the high schools of the Korça region refer to the syllabus in their actual classroom practice and to determine the role of the syllabi and the methodology in language teaching and their effect on learning outcomes.

Key words:

Syllabus, language acquisition, Secondary education, English teachers, questionnaire

1. Introduction

As English becomes more widely used as a language for international communication, representations of English teaching and learning evince a greater diversity of viewpoints.¹

In dealing with the syllabi for English, each teacher interprets and accommodates them to their personality, experience and preconceptions, thus creating a teaching style or plan of action which the teacher seeks to implement in the classroom. Teachers claim that their intention is to promote an open, responsive, learner-centered and “democratic” classroom

¹ Gradol, 2006 p. 48.

learning environment.² To this effect, good use should be made of the syllabi designed by the Institute of Curricula and Training, part of the Ministry of Education and Sciences in Albania. The teachers' answers show that they try to understand the context of teaching through their learners' perspectives, offering conclusions about the extent to which the syllabi incorporate their overall goals, about the teachers' responsibility for using the various components of the syllabus with a view to ensuring the students' better acquisition of the English language.

Syllabus design and implementation involves a process of didactic reflection, which interprets pedagogical acts in terms of an educative aim. In this context, the teacher is like an ingenious craftsman who contextualizes the use of his teaching tools both to the didactic principles pursued and to the conditions of his classroom practice.³

2. The principles of syllabus design

Defining the syllabus

Any syllabus expresses, however indirectly, certain assumptions about language, about the psychological process of learning, and about the pedagogic and social processes within a classroom.⁴

The syllabus is simply a framework within which activities can be carried out. It is a teaching framework meant to facilitate learning. It only becomes a threat to pedagogy when it is regarded as an absolute rule for determining what is to be learnt rather than a mere point of reference against which outcomes can be measured.⁵

The syllabus is the specification of the teaching program, or the pedagogical agenda, which defines a special subject for a particular group

² Richard and Nunan, 2002, p. 270.

³ Astolfi- Develay, 1989, p. 9.

⁴ Breen 1984, p. 49.

⁵ Widdowson, 1984, p.26

of learners. It also sets the pedagogical objectives. But it is crucial to be known that a syllabus is the instrument of an educational policy.⁶

The teacher's task is to follow the syllabus as a course of action by whatever methodological means seem most appropriate for the facilitation of learning.⁷ This is what the Albanian high school teachers interviewed generally agree on.

Widdowson argues that the principles upon which the syllabus has been designed should be made quite explicit so that teachers can submit them to appraisal and application. In this way, teachers can make use of the syllabus as a set of bearings on the planning of their own course in a lesson sequence (an issue understood and agreed on by Albanian teachers). This ensures the realization of aspects of language and learning which the syllabus of its nature cannot account for.

So a syllabus is a construct whose principles teachers can use and adapt to the circumstances of their own classes. In this explicit way, the syllabus becomes an important element in the continuing education of teachers, as they experiment with this variable realization in the process of actual teaching.⁸

What most syllabus designers and course-book writers try to provide is a kind of multi- syllabus, in other words an interlocking set of parameters for any particular level or stage of study, which includes not only grammatical and functional syllabi, but also linguistic and communication skills. Syllabus designers thus juggle with issues of grammar, lexis, functions, topics and tasks when putting together a teaching sequence, such as the course-book content.⁹

⁶ Widdowson, 2008, p. 127.

⁷ Widdowson, 2008, p. 129.

⁸ Widdowson, 2008, p. 154.

⁹ Harmer, 2007, p. 369.

3. The structure of the secondary education syllabus

Educators recognise that curricular innovation is an extremely complex matter because of the need to take into account the perceptions of the key stakeholders within specific socio-cultural contexts. Of these stakeholders, teachers play the key role in the success or failure of a planned innovation, since they are the executive decision makers in the actual setting in which the intended innovation is to be realised – the classroom.¹⁰

Carless emphasizes that “teachers not only need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the innovation, but more importantly, how the innovation is best applied in the classroom”.¹¹

Secondary Education

Secondary General Education provides the framework in for expanding and deepening general knowledge gained during elementary education. General secondary schools may design educational programs so as to enable students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for their high school studies or for specific professional training. The duration of general secondary education is three years.¹²

Within the high school core curriculum, foreign language study develops in the 10th and 11th grades to three classes hours per week and in the 12th grade to 4 classes per week.

Class	Hours per week	Weeks	Total
10	3 hours	36	108
11	3 hours	36	108
12	4 hours	34	136

¹⁰ Markee, 1997.

¹¹ Carless, 2001.

¹² Albanian Investment, Development Agency, 2010; p. 15.

The total for foreign language instruction in secondary Education amounts to 352 classes.

In an analytical planning, the teacher plans the distribution of learning objectives according to specific topics, without neglecting the 70% of the classes planned for the acquisition of new knowledge and the 30% of general knowledge processing.¹³

In the general curriculum, the foreign language course figures as a core subject in high school, essential for the students' instruction. In today's context, where social and political relations with Europe are more and more essential in relation to Albania's aspiration for European integration, the main educational trend is the creation of a pluri-linguistic, multicultural environment, in which foreign language teaching contributes not only to the linguistic and cultural education of the learners, but has a particular impact on the cultural exchange between our country and other countries.

However, there is a significant mismatch between the existing educational norms in Albania and those implicit in the expected outcomes of their usually strongly 'nativespeakerist', state-controlled system of English curricula. In many parts of the world, such 'communication-oriented' curricula appear to have been introduced by national education policy makers, with little thought to the demands made on English teachers by these expected outcomes, or to the teacher educators' capacity to provide teachers with appropriate support.¹⁴

Learning a foreign language enables the integration of increasing numbers of Albanian students in a multi-linguistic cultural reality. The training of foreign language learners creates conditions for deepening their knowledge of the cultural values of the rest of the world, alongside the dissemination of our national values throughout the European nations.

¹³ Udhezues kurrikular, IZHA K1 10- 12 , 2010, p.11.

¹⁴ Holliday, 2005.

The acquisition of a foreign language helps learners in their preparation for lifelong learning and for using the foreign language in decisions which affect their progress as individuals and the progress of the community at local and national level.

Referring to the level reached in the ninth grade and the skill descriptors according to the Common European Framework of Reference, the foreign language curricula for the 10th and 12th grades aim to achieve the level B2, which the learners should attain in the four competencies attesting to the acquisition of a foreign language.

The syllabus for each grade is divided as follows: Communication and cultural education (85 classes), linguistic education (23) for grades 10 and 11; Communication and cultural education (104 classes), linguistic education (32) for the 12th grade¹⁵. The total number of classes for secondary school is **352**.

The Common European Framework of Reference provides guidance on the number of guided teaching hours needed to attain the aims of each CEF level. These teaching hours are calculated for 60 minute-classes:

B1+ level - Approximately 350- 400 hours

B1-2 level - Approximately 400 -450 hours

B2+ level - Approximately 500-600 hours¹⁶

These guided teaching hours in the CEFR are the hours during which the learner is in a formal learning context such as the classroom. In total there are approximately **600 teaching hours of 60 minutes**, or, if converted to **45 minute** teaching hours, there are **800 hours**. If we examine the concordance between this and the syllabi of the Institute of Curricula and Training of the Ministry of Education in Albania, it results that in Secondary Education, which includes levels B1+ and B2+, the total number

¹⁵ Programet e kurrikulës bërthamë të gjimnazit (klasa X- XII), Gjuhe angleze, 2010, p. 12.

¹⁶ Teacher's guide to CEF, p. 7.

of **45 minute** teaching hours is **352**. If they are converted into **60 minutes teaching hours there are 264 hours**.

It is clear that the number of classes provided by secondary education in the Albanian context is very small when compared to the standard of hours set by CEFR. The English language program for the **12th grade** aims to achieve and implement standards for the teaching, learning and assessment of learners at the language level B1+ in accordance with the Common European Framework for Languages.

Based on the philosophy and guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and of the National Curriculum of Modern Languages for Pre-university Public Education, the syllabus for the 12th grade outlines all the linguistic and cross-cultural skills obtained from grade 3 to grade 9, highlighting the balance between the learners' language proficiency and the communicative skills and abilities of self-expression in the English language required at the level of independent user.

The syllabus is based on the interests and characteristics of the age group and caters for the independent intellectual and socio-cultural development of the learners. The English language program for grade 10 aims to develop linguistic, cultural and intellectual learning able to further sustain lifelong learning. It aims to develop the students' critical thinking and learner independence outside the classroom, encouraging different forms of individual and group-work.

The educational content of the English language course for grade 10 is meant to develop language education from the A1-B1 levels attained in elementary education to the level B1+ aimed at during the stage of upper secondary education.¹⁷

The English language program for **grade 11** is an official document intended to achieve and implement the standards of teaching, learning and

¹⁷ Programet e kurrikulës bërthamë të gjimnazit, kl. X, Gjuhe angleze, 2008, fq 48.

assessment of students at the B1.2 levels, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, enabling students to go from the breakthrough level (B1+ in class 10), to the threshold level of independent user¹⁸

This program also supported the National Curriculum guidelines for Modern Language study within University Public Education. The 11th grade program caters for all language skills, obtained from the 3rd grade to the 10th grade. The content of the program for English language education in the 11th grade, following levels A1 to B1+ obtained during the 9-year educational cycle, is aimed, at this stage of upper secondary education, at level B1.2.

The new program of teaching English in the **12th grade** aims to further increase the opportunities offered to learners to develop linguistic competences and cultural awareness.

The program also aims to expand the students' knowledge of linguistic and grammatical areas, to deepen their insight of the cultural and social dimension of English-speaking countries, to improve the communication skills in the English language, as well as linguistic literacy and understanding of this language¹⁹. The learning objectives of the syllabus at this stage are aimed towards the B2+ level, so the learners are given practice enabling them to become independent users of the English language.

4. The relation of CEFR with the syllabus of ICT

Setting the aims and objectives of language learning and teaching should be based on an appreciation of the needs of both learners and society, which determines the kind of tasks, activities and processes that the

¹⁸ Programet e kurrikulës bërthamë të gjimnazit kl.XI, Gjuhe angleze, 2009, fq. 2.

¹⁹ Programet e kurrikulës bërthamë të gjimnazit klasa XII, Gjuhe angleze, 2010, fq 12.

learners need to carry out in order to satisfy those needs, as well as the language competences and strategies they need to develop in order to do so.²⁰

In drawing up curricular guidelines or formulating syllabi, authorities concentrate on the specification of the learning objectives. In doing so, they may specify only higher-level objectives in terms of tasks, themes, competences, etc. They are not obliged, though they may wish to do so, to specify in detail the vocabulary, grammar and functional range which will enable learners to perform the tasks and approach the topics prescribed. They may also wish to lay down guidelines or make suggestions as to the classroom methods to be employed and the stages through which learners are expected to progress.²¹

Teachers are generally called upon to observe any official guidelines, use textbooks and course materials (which they may or may not be in a position to analyse, evaluate, select and supplement), devise and administer tests and prepare learners for qualification examinations. They have to make minute-to-minute decisions about classroom activities, which they can outline beforehand, but must adjust flexibly in the light of learner responses. They are expected to monitor the learners' progress and find ways of recognising, analysing and overcoming their learning problems, as well as of developing their individual learning abilities²²

In this context the promotion of respect for the diversity of languages in school is significant. It is also a matter of helping learners:

- to construct their linguistic and cultural identity through integrating into it a diversified experience of otherness;
- to develop their ability to learn through this same diversified experience of relating

²⁰ CEFR, 2001, p.131.

²¹ CEFR, 2001, p.141.

²² CEFR,2001, p.141.

to several languages and cultures.²³

5. The study

Data collection

The responses presented through the questionnaire results reflect the personality, experience and conceptions of the teachers and result in a teaching style or an action plan that the teacher needs to implement in class. Having the necessary knowledge and goals is very important, but even more important is communicating them effectively.²⁴

This questionnaire was developed so as to reveal the ways in which teachers interact with learners, transmit knowledge in the classroom and the thoughts they share on teaching, syllabus and learning objectives.

The questionnaire was used for English language teachers working in different public and non-public secondary schools located in urban and rural areas. The school teachers interviewed represent different age-groups and qualifications. The textbooks they use are written by both Albanian and foreign authors.

The subjects in the study

This research is focused on a questionnaire survey, developed with a significant number of 90 teachers, 60 of whom belong to urban areas and 30 to rural ones. The data derived from the checklist were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Percentages for all items were obtained.

The aims of the study

The research questions that guided the study mainly focused on topical issues. The questionnaire was applied as the continuation of a learners' survey, in order to detect the teachers' opinions on the English syllabus and their practices concerning: organizing classes; following the syllabus and adjusting it to the textbooks; the degree of satisfaction with the

²³ CEFR, 2001, p. 134.

²⁴ Richards, Nunan; 2002, p. 271.

textbooks; the application and realization of appropriate educational policies during the English language learning process in Korca and in its surrounding villages. This approach enables the development of an understanding of the phenomenon from the teacher's point of view.²⁵

The field of the study

The field survey was realized in the respective schools. The questionnaires were distributed in late April and early May 2013. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the teachers. As part of the questionnaires was distributed online, not all of them were answered. So from the 90 teachers planned, the number was reduced to 78.

The average class size for the urban area is 35-40 learners, while for the rural area it is 25-30 learners.

Methodology

All data analyses are presented in different graphs in percentages. The teachers were required to complete a questionnaire that examines their actual opinions of the English syllabus.

The classroom survey data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively, by considering the assumptions, principles, and values relating to the truth of Albanian teaching realities and the role that the syllabi play in furthering English instruction.

The quantitative analysis was conducted with questionnaires handed out to teachers in order to analyze the aspects of syllabus implementation in English language teaching in different public and non-public secondary schools in urban and rural areas, as well as the conformity of the syllabus with the CEFR standards.

The qualitative analysis consists in a subjective analysis based on the teachers' data and answers. As Paille points out, qualitative research

²⁵ Carless, 2001, p. 266.

deals directly with the opinion of the subjects in the study, being carried out through the common language, without technical tools.²⁶

The **questionnaires** clearly define facts or opinions that have been identified by qualitative methods.²⁷ There data given come from the Albanian teachers of English interviewed in secondary schools. Generally the questionnaire contains closed Yes/No questions, based on percentages or the gradual rating of the teachers' opinions, as well as 3-4 open questions.

The questionnaire consists of questions aimed at offering conclusions about the teachers' opinions on: the conformity of the syllabus with the age of the learners; the extent of cultural content; whether the syllabus objectives are reflected in the textbooks; how the CEFR objectives are reflected in the English syllabus compiled by the Institute of Curricula and Training; on whether the objectives of the English class can be met in large classes; whether the assessment is done according to the standards set by CEFR; the extent to which these are followed in the syllabus.

7. Data interpretation

Language awareness is essential for understanding; knowing about a language, for a teacher, is more important than knowing a language.²⁸

More, specifically, as seen in the percentages obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire questions, the following is to be noted.

The questions are grouped into Yes/No, percentages, questions assessing the language skills and objectives, the monitoring and implementation of the syllabus. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions.

The results are presented in graphs, by comparing the replies of teachers from different schools.

²⁶ Paille, 2004, p.189.

²⁷ <http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk>.

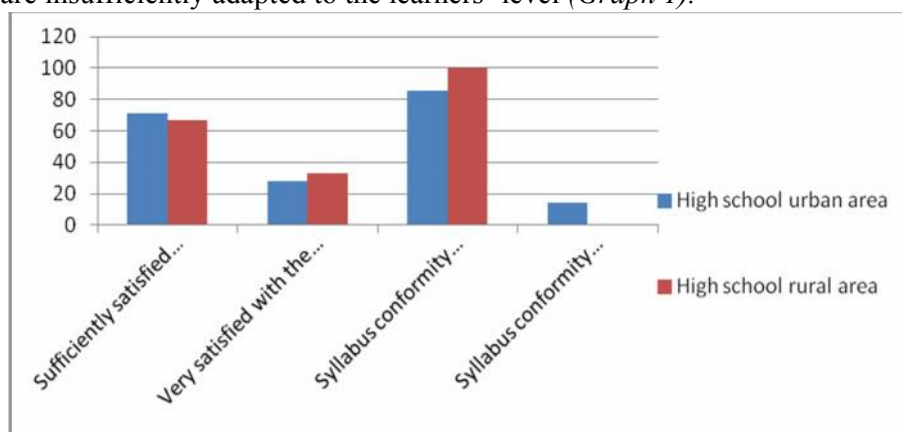
²⁸ Jenkins, p. 2006.

The replies to the questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. For data and quantitative analysis we used descriptive statistics, for qualitative analysis the questions are analyzed in general and specific categories. The development of interpretive and reflective skills offers a very practical and fruitful alternative to language teacher education.²⁹

a. Comparing the results of teacher responses in urban and rural Secondary Education: 25 teachers urban area and 15 in rural area (40 total)

From the responses of the high school teachers interviewed, it results that a high percentage of teachers from both urban and rural areas are quite satisfied with the syllabi designed by ICT (Institute of Curricula and Training) and MES (Ministry of Education and Science).

100% of the high school teachers in the rural area and 85.7% of those in the urban area share the idea that the syllabus is well-adapted to the learners' level; only a small percentage of 14.2%, believe that the syllabi are insufficiently adapted to the learners' level (*Graph 1*).

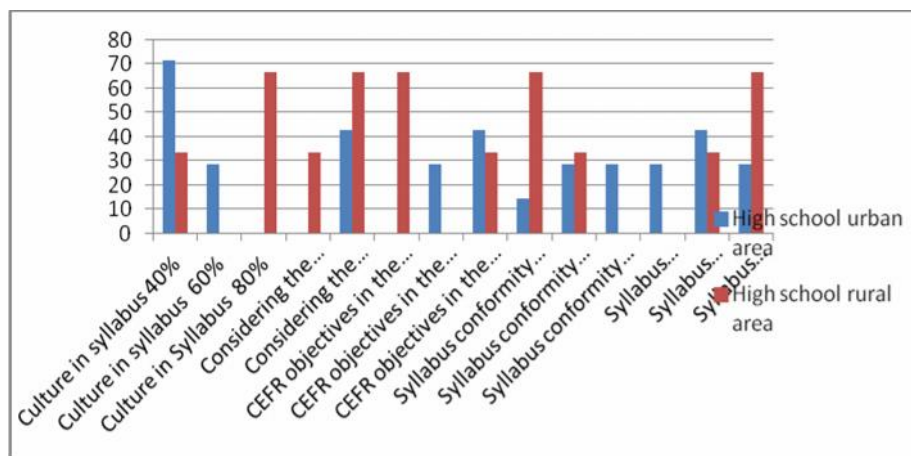


Graph 1

²⁹ Sauvignon 2003, p. 64.

Graph 2b below shows that the highest percentage of teachers in the rural area believe that cultural content covers 80% of the syllabi, compared to the 71.5% and 28.5% of high school teachers in the urban area, who think that culture covers between 40% and 60% of the syllabi. 42.8% of the urban area teachers and 66.6% of the rural area teachers are of the opinion that the learners' age is taken into consideration in a proportion of 80% in designing the syllabi.

Less than the half of the urban area teachers think that the CEFR objectives cover 80% of the syllabus, compared to 33.3% of the rural area high school teachers. Only 28.5% of urban area teachers believe that this syllabus is 100% in conformity with the CEFR. A high percentage of teachers in the rural area believe that it meets 60% of the CEFR standards. The syllabus is covered to a degree of 100% by 66.6% of the rural area teachers and by 28.5% by urban area teachers (*Graph 2*).



Graph 2

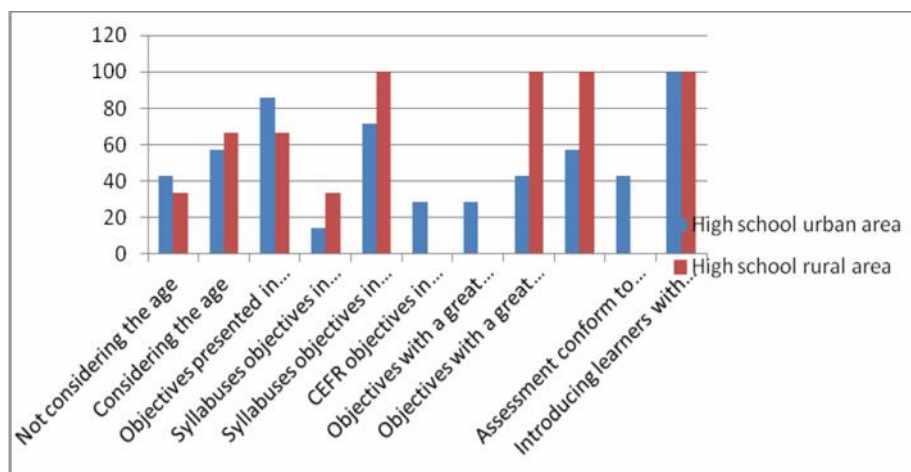
The highest percentages of the teachers interviewed believe that the learners' age is taken into the consideration when the syllabi are compiled.

The highest percentage of the teachers and 85.7% of the urban area teachers are of the opinion that the objectives are displayed in the textbooks.

There is also a high percentage of urban and rural area teachers who admit that the objectives of the CEFR are displayed in the syllabus.

According to 100% of rural area teachers and 71.5 % of urban area teachers, the objectives cannot be reached in the case of large classes. It seems difficult for them to fully achieve the lesson objectives. All the rural area high school teachers assess their students on the basis of the CEFR criteria for assessment and follow the types of assessment set by CEFR³⁰ whereas this is true about more than a half of urban area high school teachers.

All the teachers present the lesson objectives to the learners (*Graph 3*).

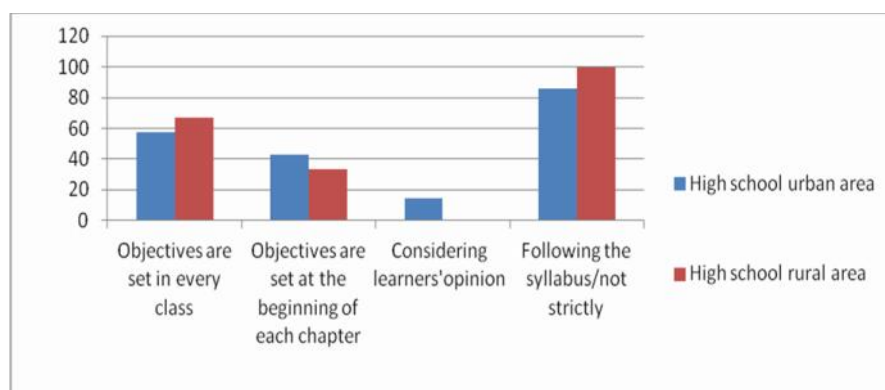


Graph 3

Graph 4 shows that the highest percentage of teachers in both urban and rural areas specify the learning objectives of every class; 42.8% of

³⁰ CEFR, 2001, p. 182.

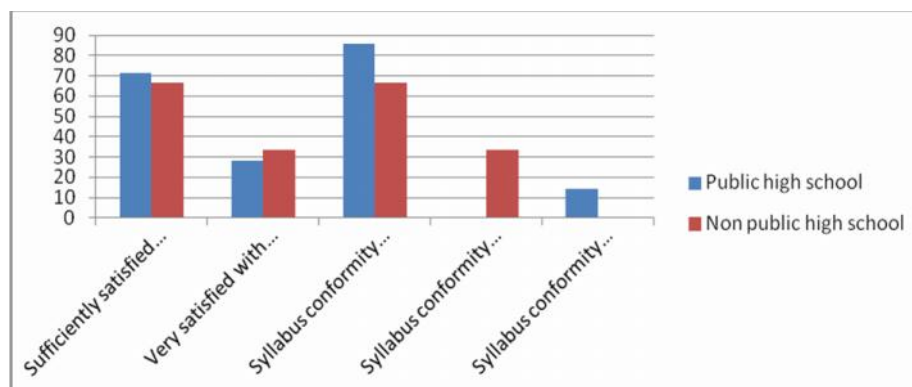
urban area high school teachers set them at the beginning of each module, compared to 33.3% of rural areas teachers. A very small number of urban area teachers take into consideration the learners' opinions about the lesson. Generally the syllabus is strictly followed most of the teachers.



Graph 4b

b. Comparing the results of teachers in public and non-public Secondary Schools in urban areas: 23 teachers from public high schools and 15 teachers from non-public Albanian schools (38 total)

This concerns the degree of teacher satisfaction with the syllabus and the perceptions regarding the correlation of the syllabus with the learners' level. It is very interesting to see from the data presented in graph 5 that the teachers in public high schools are quite satisfied with the syllabus, in a slightly higher percentage than the teachers in non public high schools. 85.7% of high school teachers believe that the syllabus is well-suited to the learners' level, while 14.2% think otherwise. By contrast, only 33.3 % of non-public high school teachers are of the opinion that the syllabus is highly suited to the learners' level in the classes where they teach (*Graph 5*).

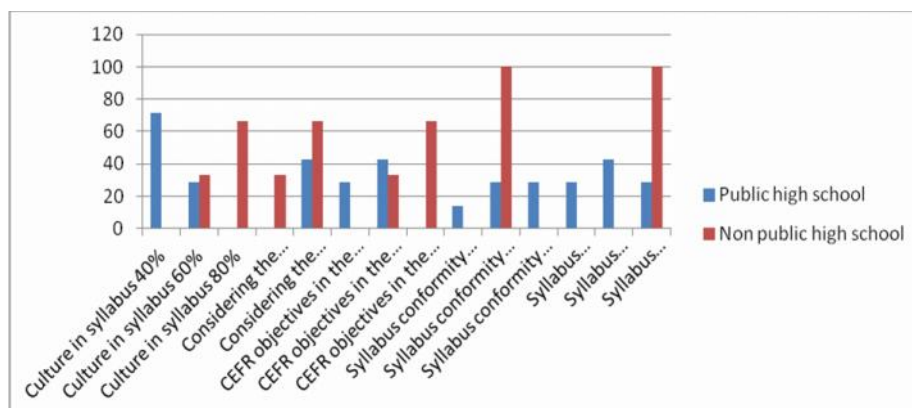


Graph 5

Graph 6 shows that 71.5% of public high school teachers consider that the cultural content covers 40% of the syllabus, whereas 66.6% of non-public high school teachers think it covers 80% of the syllabus, even if they work with the same textbook. 80% of public high school teachers believe that the learners' age is taken into consideration.

As for the CEFR objectives, 28.5% of public high school teachers think they are reflected in the textbooks in a proportion of 40%, while 42.8% of them consider this to be of 80%. A high percentage of non-public high school teachers express this view.

A relatively high percentage of these teachers support the view that the syllabi of ICT are in agreement with CEFR in a proportion of 80%, while 28.5% of non-public high school teachers believe this conformity to be 100%. Regarding the syllabus implementation by the teachers, the highest percentage, of 80%, is achieved in public high schools, compared to the 42.8% realised by non public high school teachers (*Graph 6*).

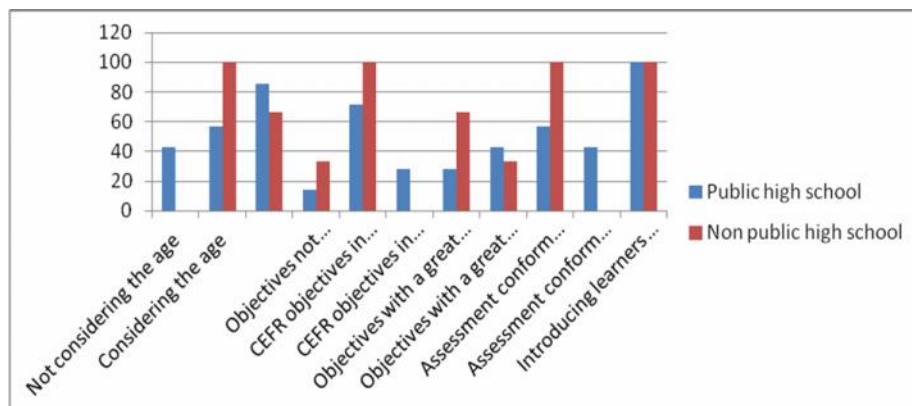


Graph 6

As it is shown above, a considerable percentage of high school teachers in both groups believe that the learners' age is taken into consideration in designing the syllabi. A high percentage of teachers in both high schools are of the opinion that the CEFR objectives are reflected in the textbooks.

66.6% of non-public high school teachers of large classes consider that the objectives are achieved, in comparison with only 28.5% of public high school teachers. Most of the teachers in public high schools find it difficult to achieve their objectives in the context of large classes. The teachers present the learning objectives to the learners and they generally set them at the beginning of each class period.

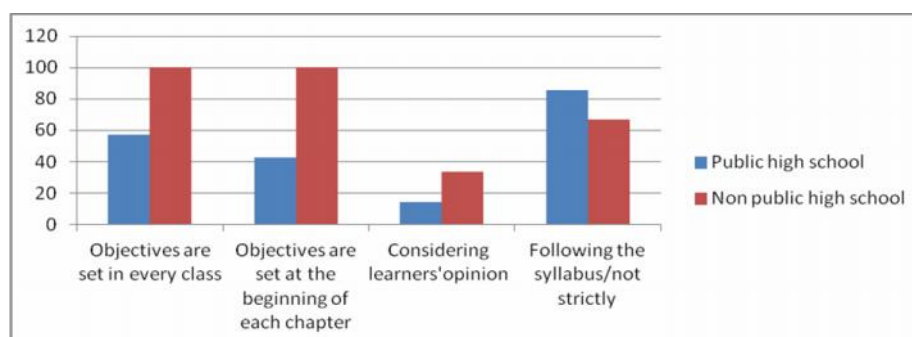
In terms of evaluation, 100% of non-public high school teachers practice assessment methods based on the CEFR, compared with 42.8% of teachers in public high schools (*Graph 7*).



Graph 7

100% of non-public high school teachers set objectives at the beginning of every class and of each chapter, compared with a high percentage of public high school teachers, who set them for every teaching class.

In both public and private high schools, the largest percentage of teachers would prefer to follow the program but not to strictly adhere to it (*Graph 8*).



Graph 8b

8. Conclusions

Bell (1983) claims that teachers are, in the main, consumers of other people's syllabuses. In other words, their role is to implement the plans of applied linguists, government agencies, and so on. However, some teachers feel relatively free to design the syllabi on which their teaching programmes are based.³¹

Most Albanian teachers, in urban and rural, or public and non-public high schools follow to a certain extent the syllabi designed by ICT and the Ministry of Education and Sciences, though not always very strictly.

This study has assessed the ability of Albanian teachers to make judgements which can affect decision-making concerning syllabus design.

The main results of the statistics above are summarized below and reflect the present situation and opinions of high school teachers on the syllabi used in the Albanian context.

As regards *teachers in urban and rural Secondary Education*, the syllabus conformity with the learners' level is higher according to rural area teachers. A high percentage of these teachers believe that the age level is well-considered. The CEFR objectives in the syllabus are represented in proportion of 80% in the opinion of a greater percentage of urban area teachers. The syllabus is conformity with the CEFR for 100% of the urban area teachers and for 80% of the rural area teachers. The syllabus is 80% covered by a great percentage of urban area teachers and 100% by the greatest percentage of rural area teachers. Age suitability is figures in the same percentage in the views of both groups of teachers. Both groups share the idea that the syllabus objectives are presented in the textbooks they work with. Teachers in the rural area find it difficult to meet the objectives with large classes, compared with a considerable percentage of urban area

³¹ Nunan, Widdowson, 1987, p. 10.

learners. Assessment is done in conformity with the CEFR, according to the opinion of the greatest number of teachers belonging to both groups.

As for *teachers in public and non-public Secondary Schools*, they are not very satisfied with the syllabus. Culture is seen to be widely represented in the English syllabus for the greatest percentage of non-public high school teachers. The learners' age is duly taken into consideration in syllabus design for a high number of non-public high school teachers. The CEFR objectives are represented in the syllabus in the view of both groups of teachers, albeit in a greater percentage for non-public high school teachers. The syllabus conformity to the CEFR and its implementation is considered to be of 80% by non-public high school teachers. In the opinion of the greatest percentage of public high school teachers, the objectives are represented in textbooks. The objectives are found difficult to achieve with large classes by public high school teachers, whereas non-public high school teachers consider them achievable. Non-public high school teachers follow the CEFR to a greater extent than public high school teachers in their assessment activity. Finally, non-public high school teachers seem to regard the syllabi more positively than public high school teachers.

Highlighting the role of Albanian teachers in improving the syllabus quality and use in foreign language education at secondary level in the Korca region, this study has managed to evaluate their views on the English syllabus, thus constituting a guide for assessing the decision- making capacities of its users.³²

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³² Nunan, Widdowson, 1987, p. 58.

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