

Improving syllabus design for task-based courses: Taking students in tour guiding-related courses' perspectives and experience into consideration

Calinao, Dan Jason ✉

Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, Taiwan (djcalinao@gmail.com)



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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to find out what teachers can learn from students' thought processes and perceptions in order to improve the design and development of syllabuses and teaching materials for courses where they are encouraged to use a foreign language, and to contribute to research in foreign language teaching and learning. Participants were Taiwanese second year undergraduate students from the departments of applied foreign languages and tourism and leisure in a university in northern Taiwan. A qualitative approach was applied using asynchronous interview in questionnaire form that is comprised of open-ended items. Findings reveal that student benefits and challenges were the main factors that can determine how well the syllabus can be redesigned and eventually become more effective for learning. Task-based courses where students are encouraged to work in teams and use a foreign language can be daunting, but can be purposeful in helping students improve their proficiency and cooperation skills in preparation for their chosen future career in the real-world context. Teachers may not need to evaluate students based on proficiency level, but rather the completeness of the task as they are process-oriented. For the courses in this present research, supplementing the course syllabuses by including a brief introduction to the tourism industry and tour guiding careers and tasks can help students learn more about the skills required for tourism-specific jobs, so they can make a personal assessment of their skills including foreign language, searching and organizing information, as well as cooperation.

Keywords: syllabus design, task-based learning, tourism, foreign language teaching, Taiwan

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1. Introduction

Course syllabuses are designed to achieve objectives that are aimed to help improve students' knowledge and skills for a particular subject in a given academic period, such as a semester or two when the courses are administered. The design of such syllabuses takes into consideration the students' need or interest in joining the course whether it is mandatory or elective. Aside from giving fundamental information and background about the subject and assessment method/s, the teacher gives tasks to students for them to practice and improve their skills. One example is the tour guiding course, in which the syllabus is designed to help students practice their verbal and communication skills by giving a presentation about a particular tourist destination. Aside from accomplishing periodic exercises and exams, students spend time on searching information about a selected destination, collaborating and discussing as a group, and finally organizing their outline, visual materials, and script for the presentation task.

While the design of the course syllabuses may or may not need to be modified or improved according to teachers' assessment of student performance after the course or throughout the period the course has been repeatedly offered, it may be important to consider students themselves in order to find out how their thoughts and experience in joining the course can contribute to improving the efficacy of the course especially if it is relatively new, so as to make it more desirable for future students to select.

Regarding the language used for instruction, several courses are taught in the native language, while others in a foreign language, especially in programs offered to students majoring in foreign languages. Tasks given to students mostly require verbal delivery, making oral communication using the foreign language and proficiency highly essential. Despite the short length of one course, students are given ample time to prepare and are expected to have at least intermediate foreign language proficiency level prior to taking the course in order to comprehend the lectures, explanations, and questions given by the teacher, and to understand and prepare for course requirements. In the tour guiding course, students need to give a presentation about a tourist destination using a foreign language.

The new elective courses of oral communication for tour guiding and tourism marketing and planning offered to Taiwanese second year undergraduate students from the departments of applied foreign languages and tourism and leisure in a university in northern Taiwan require or encourage students to use English in class during discussions, exercises, and eventually for the final presentation. The need to provide such courses was for the department of applied foreign languages' goal to offer courses to students who may be interested to work in the tourism industry, and for the department of tourism and leisure to offer courses that can help students practice and apply their English language skills. While a large number of students are not equipped with a favorable English proficiency particularly those from the tourism department, opportunities in the form of speaking, reading, and vocabulary exercises are given to students to help them practice the language. The teachers also hope students use English for their final presentation, not only because tour guides in the real world are required to be proficient in a targeted foreign language, but English as the universal language is also indispensable.

The purposes of this study were to find out what teachers can learn from students' thought processes and perceptions in order to improve the design and development of syllabuses and teaching materials for courses where they are encouraged to use a foreign language, and to contribute to research in foreign language teaching and learning.

Thus, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What factors can be derived from students' perceptions on the courses of oral communication for tour guiding and tourism marketing and planning?
2. How can these factors be utilized for improvement in pedagogical context?

1.1 Course syllabus for English communication for tour guiding

The outline of the course was organized according to the completion of the course book and additional exercises for reading, pronunciation and speaking task such as role play where a conversation about a famous tourist destination happens between a tourist and a tour guide. The course book included exercises similar to the additional exercises prepared by the teacher, but mostly fill in the blanks and multiple-choice items. Students need to finish a unit of the book each week.

For the midterm presentation, students were tasked to organize a 3-day itinerary for a tourist destination, while they will act as tour guides for the final presentation, giving facts about the tourist destination (Examples: history, size, population, shops), suggesting what tourists can see – tourist attractions (natural or man-made attractions), what tourists can do – activities/events /where to eat, giving directions and transportation information, and recommend hotels or other accommodations. Since the students are already familiar with most local destinations which facilitated their selection and preparation, they were only given choices of tourist destinations in Taiwan. The students were given the freedom to choose to present as a group or individually. If they opt to present as a group, they selected their own group members, with two to four members in a group. Students prepared PowerPoint files for both midterm and final presentations.

1.2 Course syllabus for tourism marketing and practice

The course aims to familiarize students with the abilities of researching, planning, and promoting possible tourist attractions in Taiwan. Initially working individually then in groups, students are required to assess the touring potentiality of undeveloped spots and to design an itinerary, including introduction, transportation, accommodation, and estimated costs. Throughout the course, themed cultural tourism is also introduced to the students such as dark tourism, ecotourism, and food tourism, which the teacher eventually allotting different touring themes to different groups.

Both courses ran for one 18-week semester, with weeks 9 and 18 for midterm and final presentations. One factor in the stage of preparation for a course requirement such as final presentation is students' thought processes in organizing and composing. These involve independently gathering and selecting information about the destination, organizing the presentation outline, preparing the visual materials such as images and the PowerPoint file, and finally writing the script for the presentation task, especially for students who are not able to give a presentation spontaneously and need to read a script. These activities may not be fully monitored by the teacher, especially when they are conducted outside the classroom at any time after class time.

2. Literature review

2.1 Course syllabus design

A syllabus outlines the plan for the course and communicates information about a course (Wagner et al., 2022). It is a plan about what needs to be included in the course for the learning objectives (Baznar et al., 2015). It is an instrument by which 'the teacher can achieve a degree of 'fit' between the needs and aims of the learner and the activities which will take place in the classroom' (Yalden, 1983, cited in Hadley, 1998). A typical syllabus contains basic information and description about the course, schedule, course materials, and other requirements such as quizzes and exams. While there can be no single type of content that is appropriate for all

teaching settings (Reilly, 1988), teachers make effort in designing an ideal syllabus for their course. While a syllabus is required in order to produce pragmatic and pedagogical efficiencies (Brumfit, 1984), the design may depend on certain aspects that are learner-centered, such as acknowledging their needs and goals (Cotterall, 2000, 1995), attitudes, perspectives, and motivation for learning (Fink, 2012; Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008; Parkes & Harris, 2002). Learner-centered syllabus as well as learner-centered teaching gives students the opportunity to make choices on how they will learn and to take responsibility for those choices (Ludy, et al. 2016). This is intended to motivate students to embrace learning and to appreciate how the learning outcomes of the course may enhance their professional preparation (Fink, 2012). Therefore, the teacher should provide ways for the students to be able to not only practice and apply their knowledge but to ensure student needs and goals are satisfied and achieved. However, students need to be aware of how the language learning process works in order to plan effectively and manage their learning. Cotterall (2000) therefore asserted that the course needs to promote the use of tasks that not only have to replicate real-world communicative situations, but also should articulate learning strategies so that the students can learn explicitly and choose the ones that fit their learning styles and preferences.

2.2 Task-based syllabus

Task-based syllabus is a type of syllabus in which the content of the teaching is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students perform with the language they are learning (Rahimpour, 2010). According to Ellis (2003), a task is a work plan that requires learners to process language in a practical or realistic manner, or to use language that bears resemblance to how it is used in the real world so as to achieve results that can be evaluated based on the content created by the learners themselves. A task can be focused wherein students use oral or written skills that are mainly centered on allowing them to examine and apply predetermined linguistic features such as grammatical structure for productivity or receptiveness to stimulate communicative language. Unfocused tasks on the other hand requires students to target the use of a particular, predetermined feature in meaning-centered communication, and does not attempt to 'trap' learners into using a specific linguistic feature. Whether focused or unfocused, tasks are treated as units of teaching and may serve as the basis for designing complete courses, therefore making a task the actual means for constructing the syllabus.

With the unit of analysis being crucial for all aspects of a language program, it is important to justify how tasks can become the unit of analysis that is more effective compared to overt aspects as in the case of word, structure, notion and function. The dated but highly useful Task-Based Language Teaching or TBLT (Long and Crookes, 1992) takes tasks as the unit of analysis for evaluation in subjects that are covert, as with situation and topic. Prior to TBLT, it is important to understand developments of syllabuses according to previous classifications. Wilkins (1976, 1974) asserted two types of superordinate classes of syllabus types, synthetic and analytic. Synthetic syllabuses are designed to teach different parts of language separately and step by step so students gradually the parts until the whole structure of language has been built up. Synthetic syllabuses are more concerned on syntax, therefore includes more if not mostly focused tasks. Analytic syllabuses are based on the learner's analytic capabilities and are 'organized in terms of the purposes for which learners are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes.'

In the context of L2 learning, White's (1988) Type A and Type B syllabuses reflect Wilkins' synthetic and analytic distinction. Type A is centered on what is to be learned, and is determined by authority, makes the teacher as decision-maker, treat the subject-matter of instruction as important, and assess success and failure in terms of achievement or mastery. Type B on the other hand focuses on how the language is to be learned, is internal to the learner, and emphasizes the process of learning rather than the subject matter, which in this case is the target language. Similar to Nunan's (1988) classification, syllabuses can be product-oriented, which is focused on the knowledge and skills that students are expected to gain as a result of instruction, or process-oriented which is focused on the learning experience. TBLT therefore falls under White's Type B syllabus and Nunan's process-oriented classification because it involves processes in second language learning and place no constraints on the tasks chosen.

With Krashen's acquisition theory (Krashen, 1982), which argues that the ability to use a language is through exposure and participation in using the language, tasks therefore facilitate in using such ability. As Nunan (2001) asserted that task-based syllabuses start with needs analysis that results in a list of the target tasks that the learners need to carry out in real-life situations, tasks involving learners to be engaged in specific activities related to their chosen course or program are essential.

2.3 Students' role in syllabus design

Although teachers are primarily given the authority to construct and design the course syllabus, they should not only know the students' backgrounds, needs, motivation, and personal experiences, but should also consult with them on developing fair syllabuses (Flint & O'Hara, 2013; Camargo, 2005), particularly for a more learner-centered classroom, in which students determine what they will learn, how they will learn, and how that learning will be assessed (Richmond, et al., 2016). Chickering and Gamson (1987) described seven principles that are central to learner-centered teaching: encouraging faculty/student contacts, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, using active learning strategies, offering rapid feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. In contrast to teacher's control in traditional teacher-centered syllabus, learner-centered syllabus takes into consideration the student autonomy. Student autonomy allows the learner to take the lead of his/her learning process and it empowers the student to be an independent user of the language. The student therefore needs to be autonomous to learn and use the language (Pennycook, 1997). Task-based syllabuses therefore should allow student autonomy through activities that give them independence. This is however dependent on the type and nature of the tasks that will be given to the students.

3. Methodology

Method and data collection tool - As an action research which aimed to improve the design and development of syllabuses and teaching materials for courses where students are encouraged to use a foreign language, the study required data derived from students themselves as they give account of their experience during the course. Therefore, qualitative method was applied in this research, wherein asynchronous interview in the form of a 10-item open-ended questionnaire was administered online to the students who took the elective courses of oral communication for tour guiding and tour guide planning. The researcher-constructed questions asked to students were mostly concerned on how they described the process of preparing for their final presentation, and their intentions for registering in the courses. The questions were initially composed in English by the near-native speaking teacher who taught the oral communication for tour guiding course, and for the Taiwanese students' ease of comprehension, the questions were later translated to Chinese by the Taiwanese teacher of the tour guide planning course. The students answered in Chinese; however, they were encouraged to use English for practice.

Participants - A total of 97 students took the two courses. 45 students from the applied foreign languages department who enrolled at the oral communication for tour guiding course comprised of 19 males and 26 females, and there were 52 students, with 13 male and 39 female students, from the tourism and leisure department who enrolled at the tour guide planning course. Participants from both departments were sophomore and junior undergraduate students aged 19 to 21, and participated under voluntary basis after the researchers sent the online questionnaire after the semester via the online platform Teams.

Data collection period and response rate - The questionnaire was sent to the students two weeks after the end of the 18-week semester. After the allowance of two weeks for students to send back their responses, the researchers obtained 20 responses (21%), which comprised of 7 males and 13 females, and 16 sophomores and 4 junior students.

Data analysis - Students' answers were all in Chinese, which were then translated to English by the

Taiwanese teacher. The textual data was then analyzed by axial coding using the NVIVO software. Frequency and similarity of meaning of the key words and short phrases from answers were initially derived, followed by sub-categorization, and finally the generation of themes that then functioned as factors discussed in the following section.

4. Findings and discussions

In order to answer the first research question ‘What factors can be derived from students’ perceptions on the courses of oral communication for tour guiding and tourism marketing and planning?’, the following factors were derived: Benefits and challenges sought, uniqueness of difference of presentation, work preferences and specific needs, and practicality of the course.

4.1 Benefits and challenges sought

As students from the English communication for tour guiding and tourism marketing and planning courses were asked to describe the process of organizing the content and the details they provided or explained about the tourist destination they presented in their final presentation, it revealed that benefits and challenges were crucial factors that can determine how well the courses and the syllabus designs can become effective for learning. For instance, students have obtained information they have not previously known about the tourist destinations and attractions, yet they had difficulty selecting the highlights and the best aspects. As for the method of obtaining information, most students initially found information of attractions from online sources such as videos, while others actually visited the location to learn about local culture, transportation, and famous people and facts. Compared to using the Internet for readily available information, visiting the location, having experienced activities, sightseeing, and talked with people in that specific destination gave them first-hand experience and genuine knowledge. However, students coming to the location not purely for leisure purposes but for investigation was not an easy task. Whether students have previously visited those locations or have visited for the first time, they had to limit their time enjoying the place and its offerings and look at it under a tour guide’s perspective, giving them greater discipline and responsibility.

4.2 Uniqueness or difference of presentation

Several students also thought how unique or different their presentation should be compared to other group presentations, indicating the opportunity for creativity. Students then discussed with team members about the presentation outline, in which they distributed the sections accordingly. They ensured that responsibilities were equally and fairly distributed among members according to skills that match the responsibility. For several groups, the presentation had been a productive task, while others saw it as a challenging one owing it to students’ shortcomings such as lack of experience on doing such task as a group, making the PowerPoint file, and language proficiency for writing the script and speaking. Since students needed to have meetings for discussions and finalizing their presentation files, problems occurred concerning schedules or availability; however, since students selected their members whom they are already acquainted with, there was ease of communication both distance using message apps and face to face.

4.3 Work preferences and specific needs

As previously mentioned that students were given the freedom to work as a group or individually, students who opted to work by themselves were encouraged by the teachers to work together, yet most of them decided to work alone but had to accomplish the task in a limiting state or even without aid. The decision of some students to work and present as a group or individually also depended on the amount of information they are capable to deliver. Other students’ preference to work individually suggests that courses that require students to accomplish tasks such as presentations need to consider students’ preference, as forcing them to work as a group especially with students they are not familiar with may affect their performance and overall attitude towards the course.

Concerning the needs of students to select the courses, individual needs have to be taken into consideration, including the need to work on one's own favor or the need to develop communication skills through teamwork and collaboration. Given that the students' reasons for selecting the elective courses included intending to work as a tour guide after graduation, gaining and improving their oral presentation and English skills, and increasing their knowledge on and exposure to the tourism industry, the amount of exercises and the content for presentation tasks gave them the opportunity to learn autonomously by searching, selecting and organizing information about the destination by themselves such as popular scenic spots and attractions, discussing with group members, and assigning responsibilities. Translation from Chinese to English was also a problem, especially for proper nouns of names of places. Although the course book and additional exercises provided by the teacher have supplied students adequate and both new and previously learned vocabulary for students to practice pronouncing and use, grammar exercises may still be needed.

4.4 Practicality of the course

While some students had no experience giving tour guiding presentations in class or other kinds of oral presentations, most of them regarded the activities as helpful in practicing and improving their English and presentation skills. This is essential as the department of applied foreign languages curriculum offers a mandatory English presentation skills course, only that it is general and diverse in nature and not concentrated on tourism. However, the English presentation course is offered in the second semester on the second year of the students, simultaneously with the elective tour guiding courses. This suggests that the English presentation skills should be made a prerequisite and the tour guiding courses be offered in their third or fourth year. As for the department of tourism and leisure, offering English presentation skills and other elective courses that help students improve their English is encouraged.

As for the second research question on how can these factors be utilized for improvement in pedagogical context, all four factors previously explained call for teachers to consider flexibility in teaching without sacrificing the quality of a well-planned and well-organized syllabuses for the oral communication for tour guiding and tour guide planning courses. Although teachers may not entirely and conclusively assess and acknowledge the ability or exact proficiency level of students during the initial days of the courses, it is important to emphasize student learning differences. The aims and objectives of the courses should not be neglected, including the purposes of teaching the fundamentals of tourism and tour guiding and giving instructions to students concerning tasks. However, the organization of the designed syllabuses that may need to be revised throughout the run of the courses may include a variety of themes and activities for students to choose from based on their preferences. While teachers continue to teach such courses, obtaining of student perspectives remains essential.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Implications for teachers

Given the offered one-semester tour guiding courses for Taiwanese undergraduate students are relatively new, improvement of the designed syllabuses for these courses can be done by continuously considering students' perspectives on the task required for them to accomplish. Although this task or other similar tasks may not be ideal for courses that do not necessarily require students to practice their presentation and oral communication skills, such task being purposeful in encouraging students to use a foreign language for a profession in the real-world context may be practical. The teacher's decision to choose which type of syllabus is preferable for his or her course can be highly dependent on the topic and the amount of information and knowledge students have to obtain, in which task-based syllabus may not be effective. On the other hand, teachers who choose to assess students not through conventional exams can design courses that can be classified as White's (1988) Type B syllabus and Nunan's (1988) process-oriented classification as an approach to evaluate

students through more productive and less restricted means. If such syllabus is proven to have good results for students, the teacher can then make improvements or modifications such as adding more activities, time for students to discuss, prepare, practice and present, and supplementary exercises on pronunciation, grammar and speaking. Regardless of White's and Nunan's not-so-recent classifications of syllabus types, such earlier works of these experts signify the eminent foundation of research in syllabus design which can be adopted for diverse types of courses. Although recent researches may have sought to either question or recognize their relevance in contemporary teaching setting, these pioneering works are still applicable and favorable, particularly in courses that are activity-oriented.

5.2 Implications for learners

Considered as a prerequisite for any course design (Chunling, 2014), needs analysis of students can be a preliminary step prior to finalizing the course syllabus. It may be helpful for the teacher to find out students' needs such as improving language and communication skills or learning new topics. Needs analysis may therefore depend on the type of course whether required or elective, as the decision of students choosing a course may be due to the completion of credits. In the case of the tour guiding courses, given in this present research that 55% of students did not have any prior experience in giving oral presentations for tour guiding, and 60% do not have any plans to apply as a tour guide or any tour guiding related job, there may be a need for teachers to expound on the fundamentals of the tourism industry and tour guiding career, and tasks in the course syllabuses. This in turn can help students learn more about the industry and the skills required for tourism-specific jobs so they can make a personal assessment of their skills including foreign language, searching and organizing information, as well as cooperation. As for increasing students' knowledge, providing additional prerequisite elective courses such as English for tourism purposes, as a syllabus based on target situations is motivating for ESP apprentices (Benavent & Sanchez-Reyes, 2015), as well as fundamentals of marketing may be essential.

As several students lack oral skills for presentation purposes or have low English proficiency, assessment of students' performance was done according to accomplishing exercises, final presentations and reports. While the method of assessing students' performance in class is the teacher's discretion, elective courses may not need teachers to evaluate based on students' proficiency level, but rather the completeness of the task as they are process-oriented. Presentations given verbally and using a foreign language can be done in the simplest manner without sacrificing quality.

5.3 Limitation

The courses were offered during the Covid-19 pandemic period, causing classes to be disrupted by several students taking a leave for contracting the virus and consequently affecting their performance in class and group progress. Although face-to-face and online classes were simultaneously conducted for students to attend while in school or at home, students' condition while resting hindered their participation and cooperation.

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