
Poster Presentation

Syllabus Design for Oral Proficiency of EGAP Students in the University Classroom

Nicholas Marshall

Meiji University

This paper outlines and presents a template of the process of syllabus design for an EGAP (English for general academic purposes) at a large, private university in Tokyo. The students come from a variety of (non-English) ethno-linguistic backgrounds and the syllabus is a response to anxieties from students who cannot 1) adequately participate in English in seminars, or 2) effectively present their research in English. The paper seeks to outline and connect theoretical principles from applied linguistics with practical concerns in syllabus design. The oral proficiency that the syllabus is supposed to engender is modeled from the different but complementary perspectives of 1) interactional competence and 2) psycholinguistics. Researchers tend to adopt one or other of these approaches but for instructors working in language education, it is helpful to be aware of both. This can give a more global understanding of what benefits learners may gain from different activities.

Post-graduate students (including but not restricted to Japanese) for whom English is a foreign or alternative language, studying at a large, private university in Tokyo, need to interact with peers and professors in English in seminar groups. They also need to present their research, and answer questions from dissertation defense panels and more general academic audiences at conference presentations. The students come from a range of backgrounds including: Japan, China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and various African countries and there is usually a wide range of English proficiency levels.

Needs analyses, both formal and informal, have shown that most of the students have little experience in these domains of English use, even in cases where they score highly on tests measuring declarative knowledge of

the language. As a result, they often feel nervous and ill-equipped to perform effectively in academic English. The university has developed English courses to address this problem and for practical purposes, students from a variety of majors including: governance, literature, history, business, linguistics, etc., have been gathered together. These backgrounds are varied but do not include science or engineering, so it is possible to find commonalities under the broad rubric of EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes), which is usually considered to be a sub-set of ESP (Jordan, 1997:3).

Courses are designed to run for one semester with one 90-minute class meeting over 15 weeks. So realistically, there is not much time to seriously lift students' generative competence in English and the goal is rather, to effect change in their participatory practices, or interactional competence (Young: 2009). In effect, this means involving students in greater initiative in the co-construction of talk with others – more signifying roles – than is usually associated with the speech exchange systems of classrooms. In this approach, it is assumed that tasks and activities in the EGAP classroom will foster transfer of competencies to situations outside the class at later dates.

The following template shows the factors that feed into the syllabi written for the EGAP oral proficiency courses described above. There are two sections: theoretical concerns and practical concerns, and the practical section is logically embedded in the theoretical. When discussing oral proficiency, it is helpful to take a dual perspective including 1) interactional competence and 2) psycholinguistics. Researchers generally follow one or the other approach but for language instructors, each gives a distinct but important window on cognitive processes associated with language learning. Interactional competence (point 1), above) is underpinned by a dialogical epistemology of mind (Linell, 2009). Here, cognition is understood to be an inter-mental achievement between participants in dialogue and this is the assumption taken in 'conversation analysis'. However, psycholinguistics (point 2, above), rests on monological assumptions of mind in which cognition is modeled as intra-mental functioning, based on information processing in computers. This is the more usual approach in applied linguistics.

Syllabus Design: Theoretical Concerns

1. Interactional competence

Constructivist pedagogy

- *Thin syllabus, thick curriculum* (van Lier, 1996). Few materials are provided by instructors and instead, students collaboratively devise own topics from broad guidelines, to discuss and present to whole class later. Therefore, topics and materials arise from students' own preferences and specialist areas of knowledge and interest. The 'space' in the syllabus makes it necessary for students to construct content themselves. Here, 'syllabus' refers to course content and materials, while 'curriculum' refers to specifications about roles of both learners and instructors.
- *Peer negotiation of content*. Learners work in small groups and negotiate topic and material on which they will work. Negotiation and subsequent collaborative decisions drive interaction between learners towards a closed set of options. The key point is 'negotiated' outcomes.

2. Psycholinguistics

Need for extended speech to public audience (presentations)

- *Repeated experience of complex information processing in real time, for gains in oral proficiency*. In group work in class, learners may not be pushed to speak in extended utterances: people may communicate effectively using a large amount of ellipsis (terse, grammatically truncated speech) or strategic utterances, conveying meaning partly through non-linguistic means (gesture, body language). Presentations on the other hand, require attention to accuracy (avoidance of grammatical and phonetic error) and complexity (avoiding simple sentences) in real time (fluency).
- *In speech, simultaneous focus on 3 areas of: fluency, accuracy, complexity*. Oral proficiency is here modeled in these terms (Skehan: 1998).
- *Restricted register*: academic style with appropriate formality and absence of conversational phrases.

Syllabus Design: Practical Concerns

1. Interactional competence

Project work: Area Studies as ‘carrier’ for themes and topics

- *Example: Africa*: select country/area, and also theme: finance, economics, governance, linguistics, art, etc. (Naoumi: 2013). A broad theme is selected, in this case ‘Africa,’ which provides a very open set of potential topics for discussion and presentation. This allows students to research and then discuss and present topics related to their own particular interests or areas of expertise. Typically, the course moves from receptive and teacher-centered activity (e.g. lecture about music from Africa, with students taking notes and re-constructing text in dictogloss activities) at the start, to production skills and learner/learning centered activity, such as negotiating topics and collaborative roles in small groups, in later stages of the course. The receptive skills component of the course should contain high frequency lexis and general themes.
- *Collective negotiation of group projects*. Within small groups, learners collaboratively negotiate what they will study, plus individual roles for members, concerning what they will each contribute to the group’s division of labor.
- *Present to whole class at a later date*. This provides a concrete end product for research by learners and it is this teleology which creates purpose and the necessity for earlier collaborative preparation. Ideally, presentations can be both general, and done in small groups, and individual, following on from this. Much will depend on class size as a large number of students obviously limits time that each can take to individually present in class time.
- *Self-evaluation of performance and class work*. This idea is often linked with issues of motivation and this is undoubtedly useful. But in this case, self-evaluation can also provide an important speech role for learners, when they have to discuss with the instructor what grade they feel they should receive, and justify this.

2. Psycholinguistics

Group and Individual Presentations

- *Perform once and if time permits, repeat performance with stress on fluency and lexical density.* Learners should present some aspect of their research with minimal reading from scripts or notes so that they are close to the limit of their individual oral proficiency. It is this that can drive proficiency forward.
- *Respond to audience questions after presentation.* It is important practice for students to gain experience of answering unscripted questions after they finish presentations. By the same token it is important for students to watch others' presentations to formulate and ask questions of the presenter.

Conclusion

The items above serve as a guide for syllabus design in the case of one particular EGAP course for oral proficiency. This was drawn up in the following way: first itemizing desired competencies and linguistic registers. Then modeling theoretical dimensions of perceived student needs. Next, expressing these theoretical dimensions as design principles. Finally, instantiating these as tasks and activities. The syllabus outline above is not a static construct but is continually revised after monitoring student performance and receiving feedback from students and teachers. Revision of the syllabus is usually complex in that changing one element often impacts on others. Hopefully, the scheme described here will be useful to others involved in syllabus design.

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Author bio

Nicholas Marshall works as an EAP professor in the postgraduate division of Meiji University. He received his PhD in applied linguistics in 2002, and his thesis was an interdisciplinary account of communication/discourse from semiotic, systemic functional and activity-based perspectives. He currently teaches communication and academic writing. nsmarshall23@gmail.com

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