Teaching oral communication skills in academic settings: A case study in task-based approach to syllabus design

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Abstract

This paper describes the applications of the task-based approach to designing a syllabus for an oral communication skills course in an academic setting. It discusses the goals of the course within the relevant institutional contexts, outlines the principles of the task-based design, describes and classifies the tasks, and provides a descriptive account of the organization and sequencing of the tasks in the course schedule. It argues that such an approach has much potential in second language curriculum development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based syllabus design has interested some researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language instruction since the mid-1980s (Long 1985; Breen 1987; Prabhu 1987; Nunan 1989), as a result of widespread interest in the functional views of language and communicative language teaching. However, under the rubric of task-based instruction, a variety of approaches can be found, e.g., "procedural syllabuses," "process syllabuses," and "task-based language teaching" (Long and Crookes 1993). At a more fundamental level, the term 'task' itself has been a complex concept, defined and analyzed from various, sometimes critical, theoretical and pedagogical perspectives (Crookes 1986; Duff 1986; Foley 1991; Crookes and Gass 1993a,b; Sheen 1994; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Skehan 1996).

However, task-based approaches entail in common a more flexible approach in which "content and tasks are developed in tandem" (Nunan 1989:16). From a course designer's point of view, the notion of task as the "unit of analysis" (Long 1985) serves as a starting point in syllabus design, determining needs assessments, content selection, learning experiences, and evaluation (as presented by Long 1985); it still remains the crucial point in task-based approaches to second language teaching.

In line with this perspective, some earlier papers (Ahmed 1990, 1991) of mine applied the principles of the task-based approach to designing a syllabus for case discussions as a complex task and explored the issue of criterion-referenced testing as a follow-up to the

syllabus design. This paper continues with the same topic of task-based syllabus design and its application in specific cases; however, it focuses on describing the design for an oral communication skills course in an academic setting. Through this description, it attempts to highlight some of the important aspects of implementing a task-based approach to syllabus design and provide some practical guidelines for designing such a course.

The paper first describes the dimensions of task as the unit of analysis and some concepts underlying 'oral communication skills' and 'academic setting'. It then introduces the institutional contexts in which the oral communication skills course is offered, and the goals of this particular course. An important part of this paper follows next, in which the principles of syllabus design, descriptions of tasks, and their design and sequence in the course schedule are presented. The paper concludes with some remarks on the strengths and the limitations of this task-based approach.

2. DIMENSIONS OF TASK AS THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

As already mentioned, the beginning point in a task-based syllabus design is the task as the unit of analysis. Of course, the definitions of task have ranged from commonsense everyday meanings to more academic- and language learning-oriented views. In this paper, as in my earlier ones, I have adopted the following definition of task: "A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan 1989:10). This definition fits better the issues of language learning in academic settings. Furthermore, tasks will be seen as "complex and lengthy activities" (Breen 1987:23).

The first step in this design is to identify and analyze the task or tasks. A useful framework is provided by Nunan (1989) in which a task is analyzed in terms of its components: goals, input, activities, teacher role, learner role, and setting. Briefly, goals express broadly what the results of a certain experience will be. Input concerns data, verbal or non-verbal, which the individual has to deal with when performing a task. Activity refers to the performance of a task itself on the basis of goals and inputs. In addition, there are specific roles for teacher and learner in a given setting.

Within this framework, the issues of grading, sequencing, and integrating are decided in terms of the task components. Grading, i.e., the level of difficulty, could be determined in relation to such task components as input, learners, and activities. Thus, taking the component of learners, such characteristics as one's confidence, motivation, prior learning experience, linguistic and cultural knowledge become important factors. In terms of

activity, factors such as relevance (i.e., personally meaningful task) and complexity (i.e., steps needed to complete the task), time and amount of help available, and cognitive and communicative demands imposed on the learners are important. As for sequencing of tasks, the principle of increasing complexity can be applied. Finally, for integrating, the principle of "task continuity," in which "successful completion of prior activities" becomes "a prerequisite for succeeding ones" (Nunan 1989:119) becomes important.

Although in the above description "task" and "activity" are distinct terms, in this paper they will be used interchangeably.

3. ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

Given this approach to course design, two aspects of oral communication skills in academic settings are important: the centrality of the classroom situation and institutional contexts. In other words, in an academic setting (as different from professional or everyday naturalistic settings), the classroom situation as the locus of instruction and learning serves as the starting point for identifying specific curricular needs and selecting relevant tasks. At the same time, the institutional contexts form the broader framework beyond the classroom situation and provide important input for designing syllabus, particularly at the level of goals and objectives.

Furthermore, at a theoretical level, it has become more clear that oral communication skills (i.e., speaking) are complex sociolinguistic phenomena (Hymes 1974; Canale and Swain 1980; Hall 1993, 1995), and that the classroom situation is not only determined by curricular and pedagogical concerns but also has "social and personal dimensions" (Prabhu 1992:230). Therefore, in the task-based design of the oral communication skills--the focus of discussion in this paper--the rich complexity of task as the unit of analysis, the classroom situation and the institutional contexts need to be incorporated.

4. THE ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS COURSE

The course under discussion is being offered as a core course in the summer Intensive English Program (IEP) at the International University of Japan in Niigata (IUJ). In order to discuss the application of the task-based approach to its design, we need to look at three important aspects first: the institutional contexts of IUJ, the goals of the intensive English program within those contexts, and the goals of the Communication Skills course itself.

IUJ, established as a private Japanese university in 1983, is an English-medium graduate-level academic institution offering master's degree programs in international

relations, development, and management. Its educational goal, or the founding principle, is to foster a spirit of internationalism. Its curriculum aims at providing the students, mostly young men and women from a variety of backgrounds and countries, with "interdisciplinary and professional knowledge which they can put to practical use in the international arena" (IUJ's *Catalogue for 1996-97*, p.5). In general, because the medium of instruction is English, and the classroom instruction is modeled in general after the Western/US educational norms, the curriculum tends to highlight the importance of interaction and participation. The pedagogical approaches in the classes in general cover a variety of styles, ranging from the traditional lectures to highly interactive and participatory activities.

Furthermore, the environment is truly international in that both the faculty and the students come from various countries (about forty). It has a residential campus in a rural setting. These institutional features produce a highly cross-cultural and international living environment on the campus. These characteristics form the institutional contexts within which the goals of the intensive English program are determined.

In these contexts, IEP is offered as a preparatory program. In other words, it is offered prior to the beginning of the regular programs of study with the overall goal of preparing the students linguistically and psychologically for their regular programs. Furthermore, it is a language program designed in terms of content-based language instruction (Brinton et al. 1989), i.e., most of the reading materials are taken from their content courses and the classroom activities approximate those in the regular classes.

Thus, IEP serves as an important orientation for the students in preparation for their two-year studies and way of life at IUJ. It is this sense of orientation that is reflected in the program goals. Accordingly, the primary goals are to develop English language skills for specific academic needs in graduate studies at IUJ; communication skills for effective classroom participation; and cross-cultural awareness inside and outside the class. Its additional goals are to provide opportunities for developing leadership, organizational, and interpersonal communication skills as members of the IUJ community; using IUJ's advanced computer and internet facilities for language learning and international communication purposes; and self-learning.

These goals are translated into core and support courses in the IEP curriculum, accompanied by some extra-curricular activities. The core courses consist of the text skills courses that focus on the reading and the writing needs of the students. The oral communication skills (CS) course is the second core course that focuses on listening and speaking skills relevant to academic needs. It also covers the goals of cross-cultural awareness, as well as, leadership, organizational and interpersonal communication skills.

The discussion in this paper is limited to those goals of the CS course that deal with speaking and interactional skills in general. Another part of the course is to develop academic listening skills, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Accordingly, the goals of the CS course are to:

- develop skills for oral presentations, group discussions and debates;
- provide opportunities for exercising initiative, leadership, and practicing organizational and participation skills in group situations; and
- develop cross-cultural awareness.

5. THE PRINCIPLES OF SYLLABUS DESIGN

Once the goals of the course are set, the next step is to formulate some principles that would apply the task-based approach to syllabus design. The principles, listed below, serve as guidelines:

A. Course structuring in terms of a series of tasks (or activities) that are linked to each other in terms of skills and subskills;

B. The tasks to be sequenced in terms of increasing complexity, culminating in a synthesizing task (or activity);

C. Clear orientation, modeling, practice, and assessment criteria as part of the preparation for task performance;

D. Peer and instructor feedback;

E. Continuous emphasis on initiative and participation;

F. Movement from teacher- to student-led activities;

G. Constant use of small group work;

H. Utilization of one's background knowledge and experience;

J. Informal learning/social activities.

The application of these principles are discussed in the following sections.

6. DESCRIPTION OF TASKS

The course is structured as a series of tasks. However, the tasks are designed hierarchically and can be classified as core, supporting, ongoing, and synthesizing activities. The core activities include individual presentations and group discussions/debate. They are designed as cycles, consisting of orientations, guidelines and modeling, preparation practice, performance, and feedback. The feedback includes both instructor and

peer feedback. There are two cycles for these core activities; the second cycle includes more complex features. The cycle correspond to the first half and the second half of the program.

It should be mentioned that individual oral presentations become the single most important activity. It serves as the pre- & post-tests for speaking, and each student is assessed individually on the basis of clear assessment criteria.

Supporting activities are problem-solving communication activities in small groups, interactions with guest lecturers in the classroom situation, and cross-cultural presentations in groups. These activities are carefully placed at different times during the course, and are designed to provide practice in sub-skills relevant to major activities.

Ongoing activities refer to the continuous, day to day, emphasis on classroom participation skills through both linguistic input and guided practice initially. It also refers to the development of a classroom culture and group bonding. In general, it refers to the development of a classroom environment in which initiative and participation are presented as core values and students are encouraged to subscribe to them.

Finally, the synthesizing activity refers to the group project work in which students in divided into four different sections produce video news magazines. This activity is completely student-led, and has a synthesizing effect in that students make use of the various skills and sub-skills learned in the other activities. It also marks the culmination of group dynamics process in the course.

7. TASK DESIGN AND SEQUENCE IN THE COURSE SCHEDULE

Before describing how the tasks are designed and sequenced, it will be helpful to describe a few details about the course schedule. The course is offered four days a week, two 90-minute periods a day, for nine weeks. In addition, there are four sections, each section taught by one instructor. One of the instructors is also the course coordinator.

Part of the course time is taken up by the academic listening component. However, the discussion in this paper deals with only the speaking component.

The descriptions below follow the classification of tasks mostly. However, it will be useful to give a detailed picture of how the course begins in the first week. Following the description of the activities at the beginning of the course, the rest of the description in this section follows the task-classification outlined above. (See Appendix A for the weekly schedule in terms of the activities.)

A. Activities at the beginning of the course

It is important that the students become clear about the goals of the course and their relevance to the program goals and the institutional contexts. It is also important to assess students' speaking skills based on their prior knowledge and experience and in direct relation to course activities. Therefore, how the course begins is crucial. The goals at the beginning of the course are:

- •To introduce initiative, interaction, and participation as key ideas;
- •To assess one's skills in oral presentations;
- •To provide opportunities for interaction with a guest speaker

These goals lend themselves to the following activities:

- •Discussing the course syllabus;
- •Listening to a guest speaker and asking questions/giving comments;
- •Getting more information by listening to a tape and listening to the instructor;
- •Asking questions and expressing opinions in a student-led group discussion.

It will be helpful to describe and analyze these activities. The ideas of individual initiative, interaction, and participation are introduced as key factors in learning experience in the international and cross-cultural environment at IUJ. These ideas are introduced by the program director at the first orientation session with which the program begins. They are further reinforced at the welcome party which is held after the students have finished their orientation sessions and pre-tests, and are about to begin their classes the next day. At the party they are encouraged to mingle with invited guests (often IUJ's top management, faculty, administrative staff, and visitors).

The first class begins with a course syllabus discussion activity. Students are given a copy of the syllabus in advance; they are asked to read the syllabus and come prepared with questions. All the students meet in one combined session for this introductory class. Students usually have a lot of clarification questions for this discussion. Towards the end of the discussion, the course coordinator and other instructors fill in some important details about the course syllabus.

This discussion activity is followed by a guest speaker's lecture. Usually this speaker is from the university's top management (e.g., the chairman). The theme of his lecture focuses on the spirit of internationalism at IUJ and its educational goals; the various opportunities students will find during their two-year studies; and the importance of initiative, participation, and cross-cultural communication. The lecture is followed by a question and answer period.

After the initial syllabus discussion and guest lecture activities, the students meet in their separate classes. In their very first class, students see the walls of the class decorated

with poster messages; these messages show such words as "initiative," "participation," "Excuse me," etc. Their attention is drawn to these messages.

The first day ends with introductions. Students work in pairs, ask each other a series of questions (listed by the instructor), and take turns introducing each other. This activity helps them to know about one another and begins the process of group bonding in the class. The instructor, too, is introduced.

The rest of the classes during the first week are devoted to two activities: individual oral presentations (OP) and practice in class participation and discussion skills.

The individual oral presentations are designed to serve as pre-tests. Students are instructed to make a five-minute presentation on a topic of their choice. They are given minimum instructions. The goal is to find out the level of their OP, given their background knowledge and experience. Each presentation is followed by a brief question/answer period. All the presentations are videotaped by the instructor.

The participation skills session begins with practice in getting more information. Students are given papers or cards showing various linguistic expressions. They listen to an audiotape and then to a mini-lecture by the instructor, and ask for more information in order to complete assigned exercises. The exercises can be completed successfully if they ask all the necessary questions. It is in general a listening comprehension activity, but highly interactive by design.

The final activity of the week is a student-led discussion, usually on the topic of "Expectations and concerns at IUJ." One of the students leads the discussion. Others are divided into three small groups. Two of the groups discuss the topic separately and present their opinions. One of the groups is assigned the role of simply asking questions and opinions. Appropriate linguistic training and other support is provided by the instructor.

B. Core activities

(i) Discussion/debate: The *first cycle* of this core activity runs in week two, beginning on Monday with teacher-led activities and ending on Wednesday with a formal discussion/debate activity on an assigned topic. The formal activity (on Wednesday) is completely student-led, i.e., students play all the roles (conductor, observer, group presenter, and participating members). It is more appropriate to call this activity a "discussion/debate" activity because it includes both group discussions and debates, including a little bit of oral presentation. The participation skills practiced during week one feed into the cycle.

The cycle begins with teacher-led activities. Students are first introduced to linguistic expressions for expressing opinions, agreements, and most importantly disagreements.

They then practice the individual expressions in response to instructor's statements. They then go through controlled practice sessions on assigned topics, the instructor conducting and observing the debate. The last practice session shifts the control of the activity to the students.

For the formal activity, the topic and the accompanying reading materials are given by the instructor in advance. Students are divided into two groups, supporting or opposing the motion of the debate. The reading materials contain enough points for both sides. One student conducts the whole activity according to specified steps; another student plays the role of a critical observer, giving comments and assessing group performance according to specified criteria.

On the day of the formal activity (task performance), the instructor videotapes it all and gives some comments only towards the end. Thorough feedback is reserved for a later day.

The *second cycle* runs in week five. It begins with a review of the video from the first cycle; students go through a feedback process based on specified criteria. They then go through a practice phase which is less teacher-led. Part of this phase includes a simulation of the second formal discussion/debate activity, with students playing all the different roles.

Two features make this second cycle relatively complex. On the day of the formal activity, two outside observers are also invited. This introduces a new dynamism. In addition, although the topic for the activity is assigned, no reading materials are given. Students have to research the topic on their own.

(ii) <u>Oral presentations</u>: The first cycle of this activity begins in week three and ends in four, although it does not run not continuously. The goals of the first cycle are to: (a) understand the characteristics of effective oral presentations and (2) practice making oral presentations with immediate feedback. At first, students discuss in small groups what an effective oral presentation is. The instructor then pulls their comments together, and shows a model video that discusses and practically demonstrates such features as structuring information and making effective delivery in oral presentations. Handouts, summarizing the points made in the video, are provided. Following this orientation session, the instructor introduces evaluation criteria form and explains the criteria.

In the next stage, students watch the video of their own pre-test presentations (in week one) and provide peer feedback to each other. The instructor, too, provides comments for each presentation.

These two stages deal with the first goal of understanding. Students come to know in general the elements of an effective presentation and have some idea about their own presentation skills.

Next, each student prepares for and makes a short oral presentation in the class. Following each presentation, both the students and the instructor provide feedback. At the end of the practice session, the instructor gives written guidelines for the formal oral presentations.

Students make formal oral presentations in week four. Each presentation is followed by a question/answer period, and concluded by the presenter's wrap-up. All the presentations are videotaped. This concludes the first cycle.

The second cycle begins in week six. By this time students have already received written assessments of their formal presentations from the instructor. They watch the video once again and receive additional feedback. The instructor then introduces guidelines for the next formal presentations. These guidelines introduce some complexity compared to the first cycle: the students have to effectively use transparencies as part of their presentations; furthermore, they have to incorporate audience's comments in their wrap-up after the question/answer period. The instructor demonstrates the use of transparencies and their clear designs. In addition, students watch and review videos of some of the most effective presentations from previous years; these presentations provide useful modeling.

During this second cycle, students do not go through any in-class practice. They prepare for the presentations on their own, and receive individual tutorials from the instructor before the formal presentations.

The formal presentations take place in week nine, at the end of the course, and constitute the post-test for speaking skills.

C. Supporting activities

(i) Problem-solving communication activities: These activities are scheduled a total of three times, in weeks two, three, and four. The first is an information exchange activity, based on a drawing task that various small groups have to complete by exchanging information about specific details to each other. It is designed as a collaborative group activity that also provides practice in giving and asking for clear directions and instructions. The second activity is a communication game, called the "Lying game." It focuses on narrative presentations, and exchange of information and opinions. Finally, the third activity, called "The Alibi game," focuses again on asking questions and defending oneself. Both the second and the third activities also lend themselves to practicing interviewing skills.

These communication activities serve two purposes: they allow the CS instructors to rotate from one section to another, providing opportunity to the instructors and the students to meet in a classroom situation. In addition, the skills for giving and receiving clear

instructions and directions, and interviewing, serve as enabling skills for use in major tasks (e.g., the group project).

(ii) Guest speakers: Some details have already been explained about the guest speaker on the very first day of classes. Three more speakers are invited to the combined sections of the CS course, in weeks two, three, and six. These speakers are content course instructors at IUJ with different approaches to lecturing, so the students in addition to getting the opportunities for classroom participation are also getting exposed to a variety of lecturing styles that they will encounter in their regular programs.

(iii) Cross-cultural presentations in groups: Since the students in the intensive program are from several countries, designated groups introduce their countries (e.g., Indonesia and Thailand) to the rest of the students. The introductions include oral presentations, videos, and question/answer period. They provide conditions for authentic, cross-cultural communication among the students, and turn out to be popular events.

(iv) Ongoing activities: For continuous emphasis on classroom participation, the orientation sessions are effectively used. In addition, practice is provided in participation skills on a continuous basis, small group work is constantly designed.

D. Synthesizing activity

Students work on producing a news magazine video. The activity is completely student led. Within the framework of some broad guidelines on what they can and cannot do, the students decide the topic, the design, the parts, and the roles. This group activity focuses directly on the ideas of initiative, leadership, organizational skills, and participation. The activity is designed as a cycle: the guidelines are introduced in week five; students discuss the topic in week six, and the design in week seven. Week eight is mostly used for project preparation, practice, rehearsal, and videotaping. The activity is wrapped up in week nine, when all the sections get together and watch each other's video.

Throughout this major activity, the instructor plays the role of language consultant and handles the video-camera.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the applications of the task-based approach to designing a syllabus for an oral communication skills course in an academic setting. It has presented a case study based on the actual development of such a course in the intensive English program at IUJ. This course has been quite successful in achieving its goals: in their

program evaluations for IEP 1995, 25% of the student body referred to the CS course, or some aspects of it, in response to the question: What did you like most about IEP?

Part of this success can be attributed to the task-based approach which emphasizes functional uses of language, i.e., what people do with language. Furthermore, if the tasks selected relate to well-defined needs in specific institutional contexts, the course becomes more relevant and useful in the minds of the students.

On the other hand, the course described in this paper has been structured as a series of tasks. However, if the tasks are not perceived to be connected to one another, if they do not fit well-defined goals and objectives, if the processes underlying their design do not get sufficient attention, and if the assessment criteria are not perceived to be valid, then the course may be reduced to just one meaningless activity after another. Thus, in spite of the perceived success of this syllabus design, constant improvements need to be made.

To conclude, the task-based approach to syllabus design has much potential, but it has a long way to go before it can claim empirical success in the field of second language curriculum developments. More data is needed, using different quantitative and qualitative research methods. Case studies provide useful empirical data in this context. The study presented in this paper, although it is at best a descriptive account at this point, contributes to the growing number of case studies in applying the task-based approach to syllabus design.

APPENDIX A

COURSE SCHEDULE IN TERMS OF TASKS (ACTIVITIES)

Weeks	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
One	Program Orientation	Welcome Party	•Course introduction. •Classroom Participation skills •University Chairman's lecture	•Oral Presentation (Pre-test) •Classroom participation skills	•Oral Presentation (Pre-test) •Classroom participation skills
Two	•Debate skills: Orientation & initial practice	•Debate Skills: Controlled practice •Guest speaker's lecture (University professor)	•FORMAL DEBATE (Student organized)	No class	•COMMUNICA-TION ACTIVITY (1) Jigsaw drawing: Information exchange activity.
Three	•Oral Presentation Skills: Orientation •Guest speaker (University Professor)	• Oral presentation skills: Practice & feedback	•Oral presentation skills Practice & feedback	No class	•COMMUNICA-TION ACTIVITY (2) Lying game: Narrative presentations; Information/ opinion exchange
Four	•ORAL PRESENTA-TIONS	•ORAL PRESENTA-TIONS	•COMMUNI-CATION ACTIVITY (3) The Alibi game: Asking questions, defending oneself.	No class	*Mid-term break*

Weeks	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Five	*Mid-term break*	•Debate Skills Review/feed back Next debate guidelines	•Debate skills: Student-led practice	No class	•FORMAL DEBATE (Student led) •Group Project Guidelines MID-TERM PARTY!
Six	•Oral presentation skills: Review and feedback	•Oral presentation skills: Next OP guidelines.	•Oral presentation skills: Guidelines & modeling •Guest speaker (University professor)	No class	•High School teachers visit. •Group Project: Discussion on topics
Seven	•Oral Presentation: Guidelines, modeling, & feedback		INDONESIA DAY Cultural presentations on Indonesia by Indonesian students	No class	THAILAND DAY Cultural presentations on Indonesia by Indonesian students •Group Project Discussion on design
Eight	•Group project prep aration	•Group project prepa ration	•Group Project RE	No class	Group project VIDEOTAPING
Nine	•Group project Review of videos and debriefing	•Oral presentations: Individual tutorials	•ORAL PRESENTA-TIONS	•ORAL PRESENTA-TIONS	FINAL PARTY!

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