

AN ORAL COMMUNICATON SYLLABUS DESIGNED FOR FRESHMAN YEAR ELT STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to design a syllabus for an oral communication class offered to the first year students at the English Language Teaching Department of a private university in Istanbul. Based on the needs analysis conducted through the administration of a questionnaire to the currently enrolled 20 students, and on the results of a follow-up interview with students and professors, some modifications will be proposed to make the current syllabus more responsive to the perceived needs and expectations of stakeholders.

I. INTRODUCTION

Oral communication is a multifaceted process that requires the ability to speak fluently and coherently with an accurate control over the sound system of language to convey meaning effectively (Murphy, 1991). The improvement of such abilities has been acknowledged as the main goal of college-level oral communication classes for ESL students, since these students may need a certain level of oral proficiency in English for vocational, occupational or general educational reasons.

The attainment of oral communication skills becomes even more necessary when the students are prospective language teachers. As they will set role models with their appropriate use of language, not only are they expected to improve their oral production abilities, but also to demonstrate a mastery of public speaking skills. Besides, they should be better listeners who are more receptive to linguistic and nonverbal cues in spoken communication. In an attempt to generate a syllabus to meet the expectations of such students, teachers and the program, the current paper reports the results of a needs analysis conducted in an oral communication class offered by the English Language Teaching program of a private university.

Syllabus Design and Needs Analysis

A syllabus is the specifications of the content and the ordering of what is intended to be taught in a program (Nunan, 1988). It is a document transforming the general philosophies and aims of a program into concrete goals and objectives to provide teachers and students with direction for activities, discussions, and decisions in a course. Not only does a syllabus articulate what needs to be achieved, and what content to be covered; it also covertly reflects the pedagogy by identifying the tasks and skills to be emphasized, and sources for instruction.

An essential step in the design of a syllabus is the determination of the specific objectives based on the needs of learners. According to Brown (1995, p.21), a needs analysis is “the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to satisfy the language learning requirements of the students within the context of the particular institutions involved in the learning situations”. To gather this information Brown suggests questionnaires, interviews, and meeting with all stakeholders involved in a particular course including the current and past students and teachers of the course, administrators, and teachers of other classes the students take.

The vital importance of needs analysis before course and syllabus design and materials development is also emphasized in vast literature on English for Specific (ESP) and Academic Purposes (EAP) and task-based learning (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Long and Crookes, 1992). Learning process in task-based view is seen as a set of communicative tasks directly linked to the goals set in curriculum (Nunan, 1989). A task-based syllabus mainly emphasizes meaning and communication through purposeful real-life activities that “...require learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom” (ibid, p.40). In other words, both teachers and learners are involved in tasks which promote real use of language, and development of a set of discourse strategies like initiating and closing a conversation, introducing a topic, taking turn and so on.

In some courses designed with specific language purposes, skills and competencies necessary for the achievement of the basic requirements of a particular course need to be considered in the design of its syllabus. In such contexts, learners need to master specific uses of language promoted in a skills-based syllabus that breaks the language into specific skills or competencies to consider within the content of a course instead of emphasizing the global components of a language. Although such syllabuses are criticized for having a reductionist theory of language as pointed by Kravke (1987), they are quite specific to learners' and programs' perceived needs, and can be used with other approaches to syllabus design as Brown mentions (1995).

Needs are quite specific to the learning situation and to those who are involved in that situation. A brief review of literature on the implementation of needs assessment revealed how expectations and needs of students, teachers and other stakeholder vary depending on the program and the specific course. In order to find the types of listening and speaking tasks in English that should be required from college students by subject-matter teachers, Ferris & Tagg (1996) surveyed over 900 professors working at four different institutions in business, engineering and science disciplines. Results of the 234 returned survey showed how instructors' requirements may vary depending on their academic disciplines, type of institution and class size. While participants from all disciplines recognized effective lecture note-taking as an important requirement, the degree of interaction in their classes varied significantly across the disciplines. Tasks like in-class debates, student-led discussion, and out-of-class assignments requiring interaction with native speakers as well as traditional speaking assignments like report speeches in class were found to be uncommon in all contexts. The frequency of interactive tasks, on the other hand, depended on the class size; such tasks were preferred more in smaller classes. Besides, participants had a tendency to opt for pair or group work in oral presentations. The findings of that study confirmed the findings of previous studies on the changing aspect of needs across the disciplines and learning contexts.

The current study will investigate the needs of first year English Language Teaching students' perceived needs with a questionnaire designed for the analysis of their needs. The results of the analysis will be evaluated in order to design a syllabus with a task and skills-based approach in order to meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

2. METHOD

2.1 The Oral Communication Course

The oral communication course investigated in this paper is a four-credit, two-semester course of 5 contact hours a week offered to first year undergraduate students mastering English Language Teaching at a private university. The course aims to improve students' formal and informal language use during small-group and whole-class activities in the class and social interactions outside of the class. As this student-centered course is designed to maximize student-to-student interaction while minimizing the teacher talk and lecture, it does not have a textbook to follow strictly, but some handouts compiled from different sources. The course is offered in two sections by the same professor.

The course also aims to increase students' abilities to speak in front of an audience with an effective use of body language. Therefore, 2 of 5 hours a week that are intended as lab hours is mainly spent with public speaking practices. During the 3-hour part of the class, the students are asked to prepare a 5-minute presentation, a 10-minute presentation, and a final 15-minute presentation to deliver on any topic they choose to inform or persuade their audience. During their speech delivery, they are assessed by their professor according to a set of criteria they were informed about during the first weeks of the class.

2.2. Participants

20 freshmen enrolled in this class during the fall semester of 2008 participated in this study. 12 of these participants were section 1 students, while the eight of them

were from section 2. The background questionnaire given to the students revealed that most of them were graduates of Anatolian Teacher Training Schools. Except for 2 of them who studied one year at the prep school of the same university, the rest of the participants were allowed to start the program without a prep requirement after being given a proficiency test assessing their language skills.

To have other stakeholders' point of view in the oral communication needs of students, 4 staff members were interviewed for the purpose of this study. One of the professors interviewed was the current teacher of the class, who is a native speaker of English. As their views reflect the expectations of the program, it was important to take their views to add a dimension to the perceived needs of students.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

To identify learners' perceived needs and expectations a questionnaire was developed with expert opinion, and pilot tested for the verbalization of its items. The questionnaire included four sections on skills required in oral communication (section B), types of oral communication (section C), competence on general speaking and presentation skills (section D), and types of speeches (section E) perceived to be important during and after the completion of this class. While some sections included yes/no questions, some others included 4- and 3- point Likert scales ranging from 'very important' to 'not sure', and from 'very often' to 'never', respectively. When the data obtained through the questionnaire were entered into SPSS 15 for descriptive and frequency analysis, the lowest score of 1 was given to 'very important' and 'often' points of the scales; that is, the lowest grades obtained revealed the highest need for the inquired skill.

The qualitative data were collected through a whole-class interview conducted in Turkish. Both students and professors were asked questions similar to the ones on the questionnaire for triangulation purposes. They were also asked to evaluate their current syllabus with main focus on the aspects of the class that need to be changed to

better meet their language needs. The session was audio-recorded to be transcribed later.

3. RESULTS

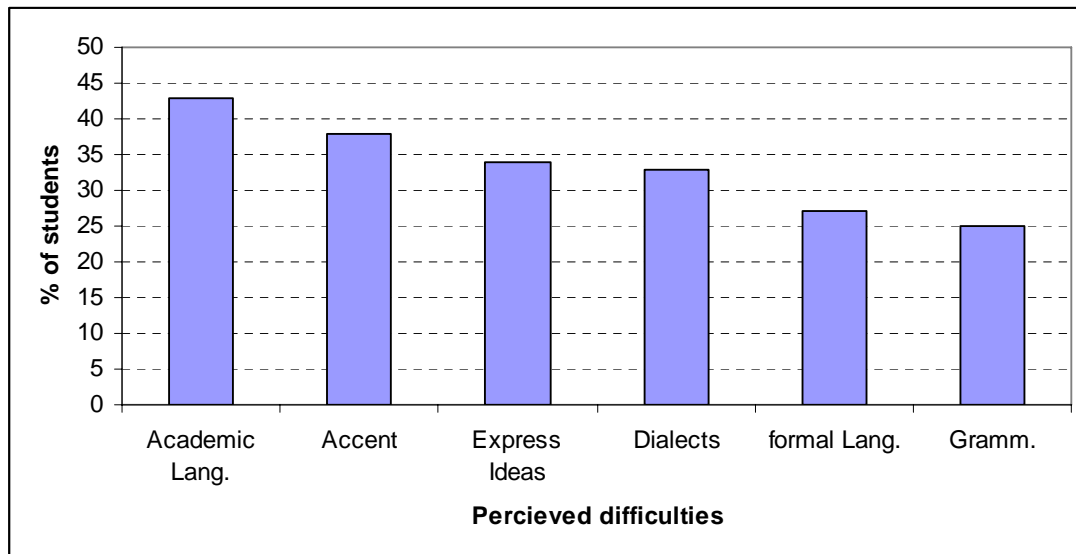
3.1. Results of the Needs Analysis Questionnaire

Each item on the needs analysis questionnaire was analyzed for frequency of answers obtained by each student. The mean values of each item were calculated. The results on section B revealed that 95 % of first year ELT students ranked speaking and listening as the most necessary skills to focus on not only in the oral communication class, but also for their success during the course of their study in the program. These skills were followed by reading (50%) and writing (45%) for a successful completion of the program.

In section C, 90 % of the participants revealed their expectations related to the use of English in their daily conversations during and after this course. This was followed by small-group discussions with 85%, interactions with native speakers with 70 %, classroom discussions and presentations with 65 %, and addressing to an audience with 60%. However, only half of the participants expected to get involved with debates and lectures. The students also identified the most problematic areas of interpersonal communication, task-based communication, and public speaking for themselves. They reported difficulties in whole-class and small-group discussions, debates, presentations, daily conversations and running errands, and in their interactions with natives. When the mean values of three types of oral communication were compared, they seemed to have more difficulties with their interpersonal and in-class communications compared to public speaking.

In section D, students stated the frequency of their perceived problems regarding their competence in general speaking and presentation skills. As shown in the following figure, 43 % of them expressed difficulties with the use of academic language followed by understanding different accents (38%), expressing ideas (34 %), understanding different dialects (33 %) and the use of formal language (27 %).

One fourth of the students, on the other hand, seemed to have problems with their English grammar.



As for the important aspects of the oral communication, almost all of the participants believed that it is of great importance to use language accurately, appropriately, clearly, and vividly with varied syntax and vocabulary choice, and correct intonation during the classroom presentations. Besides, they agreed with the necessity of affective use of body language (i.e. eye-contact, facial expressions, voice, etc.), speech organization (i.e. well formulated introduction, logical sequencing, smoothly connected ideas, and a closure), speech outline, audience analysis, and visual aids for an effective delivery of public speaking.

In the final section of the questionnaire, the students were asked about their needs to get informed of a variety of speech types. The results showed that the students identified entertaining (38%), informative (29 %), newspaper article commentary (23 %), persuasive (19%), and introductory (19%) speeches as the most often needed types of the speech.

3.2. Results of the Interview with Participants

Data obtained through a 40-minute interview with students revealed that these students are in need of improving their fluency and accuracy, and appropriate use of vocabulary. The students clearly want to work more on group projects in a collaborative way instead of spending most of the class-time and energy on individual presentations. Although they believe in the necessity of being equipped with the principles of effective public speaking, they claim that such presentations encourage them to memorize their speeches.

A detailed analysis of the interview reveals some suggestions for the improvement of course content. The students need

1. More opportunities for collaborative group work tasks.
2. Less focus on timed and individual presentations.
3. More guidance by their teacher on the analysis of different speech types, their organizations and outline before the actual presentation.
4. More contact with the native speakers of English.
5. More emphasis on listening activities like movie-watching to get exposed to authentic use of language and different accents.
6. More feedback on their use of language.
7. More emphasis on their pronunciation.
8. More guidance on the use of visual aids and technology for an effective presentation.
9. More guidance on general study and research skills.

The interview data obtained from the professors showed some similarities to students' expectations and needs. They emphasized the necessity of raising teachers who will set good role models with their accurate and effective use of language; therefore, they believed it is imperative to get focused on their deficient language skills.

One participating professor made the following suggestions also shared by the other participating colleagues to improve the content of the lesson:

I believe the current syllabus is very vague in terms of what the student assignments are each week and how they apply to the goals and objectives of the course. If I were to redesign the syllabus, I would want the weekly assignments to be more clear and easily relatable to the course objectives. I do like the presentation aspect of the syllabus, but the weekly assignments as a whole should be worked out in more detail. I personally believe that one way of doing this is to develop some clear weekly objectives... Possibly even some task based activities could be developed to meet student needs.

The other professors also pointed out the necessity of including some skills and task-based activities to engage them with more collaborative work.

As revealed by interview data, teachers' expectations demonstrated some congruence with the expectations of their students. Within the light of needs analysis and the suggestions made by both groups of participants, the current study developed a preliminary syllabus with an example lesson plan based on the objectives that will improve their communicative and interactional skills as well as their presentation skills through the meaningful tasks to be completed individually or in a group. The assets of the new syllabus will be illustrated in the following section.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the needs analysis and interviews formed the basis for the generation of new syllabus for oral communication class. The new syllabus was designed with better identified objectives, and therefore included some assets that were not available in the previous one. To illustrate this, as both learners and teachers identified listening skills as an indispensable part of oral communication classes, lab hours were devoted more to the development of listening skills with the watching of 20- to 40-minute popular TV shows followed by whole-class discussions or group

tasks on related themes and topics. By this asset, it was also aimed to familiarize students with different accents and dialects as they were reported as the most frequent difficulty they experience.

The new syllabus included more group work activities, debates, whole-class discussions and task-based individual presentations. Although students revealed a negative attitude towards the use of timed individual presentations, teachers believed in the necessity of such presentations to give students more chance to become aware of their use of body language as well as the way they address people so they can detect what needs to be improved before their actual presence in a real teaching environment. Besides, students will often need to make classroom presentations during the course of their studies, especially in 3rd and 4th years in college. Therefore, in an attempt to increase their awareness in relation to their use of verbal and non-verbal means of communication, self- and in-class video-recording activities to be reviewed with individual students were given an importance place in the syllabus.

Finally, a new group work project was added to the syllabus to encourage learners to do some research on a topic of interest using the outside sources, and reliable online sites and journals. Through this assignment, students will also get involved in the use of language in more academic settings, and realize the differences between daily language used for interactional purposes and the formal language used in papers.

Limitations of the study

The needs analysis conducted in this study was used in the development of a syllabus for an oral communication class offered in an English Language Teaching program. Because of the time limitations, the study was conducted only with first year students who are already taking the class. In a larger-scale study, the needs analysis questionnaire can be applied to all students in the program to have a better perspective on the changing aspect of their needs. However, this study should be

considered as a preliminary or a pilot study that intends to reveal first year students expectations and urgent interactional needs.

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