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A Report on the Development of Teaching Audience-Appropriate English Speeches in a Collaborative Task-Based Framework

Joel HENSLEY*

Abstract

This is a report on the development of a collaborative task-based syllabus in a third-year (English) Language Communication class at a public university in Japan over the course of four consecutive semesters. The aim of this paper is to provide an examination into the methods implemented and adapted in a syllabus concerning audience-appropriate speeches in English. The author/instructor, over the course of four semesters, made incremental changes to the syllabus and class format while maintaining the speech-centered content. Teacher and student responses from each implementation are reviewed, and the motivation and method for the final collaborative task-based syllabus design are discussed.

Key words: EFL, task-based, syllabus design, speeches

1. INTRODUCTION

When a class of motivated learners, regardless of ability, puts forth the effort to learn, teaching can be a truly invigorating experience. Moreover, when such a class is guided by a well-formulated and appropriate syllabus, observing learners attempting new forms and skills as they progress on their way to new mastery can be deeply gratifying.

Unfortunately, as any experienced teacher is well aware, not every class is entirely motivated; no syllabus is entirely flawless. In the past two years, I have taught the Language Communication course for third-year students in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Each semester, I have been responsible for both liberal arts-focused and science-focused class sections. Thus, I have effectively taught the same course a total of eight times. As can be expected, some semesters and classes went more smoothly than others. In teaching, this is naturally par for the course.

A critical question which must be asked, then, is why some classes were seemingly more successful than others. Through this kind of self-evaluation, teachers can better understand their own class dynamics and strive to improve learning outcomes in future classes. Such self-reflection is one of the objectives of this paper. Simultaneously, it is my hope that, in considering the outcomes of past classes and reporting on them from the perspectives of both myself and the students, insights can be garnered into the kind(s) of classes that can be effective in similar situations.

2. SETTING THE STAGE

As mentioned above, all the classes under review were taught in the Faculty of Environmental Studies to third-year students. One feature of these classes worth mentioning here is that, unlike some university “communication” courses in which one teacher may be responsible for classes of 60 students or more, enrollment in any one class is kept under 25. This

*Faculty of Global Communication, University of Nagasaki
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allows for much more individualized interaction between students as well as between student and instructor. In any communication class, this should of course be a given.

The department divides its (English) Language Communication courses into two sections by student focus: liberal arts and science. Both sections are required to take English communication classes as first- and second-year students as well, focusing on fluency as well as bottom-up skills such as pronunciation and grammatical patterns. Thus, by the time they reach my class in their third year, students have already experienced four semesters of English communication at the university level. Additionally, nearly all of the third-year language courses are composed of mixed groups of students in regard to language level, with only one section (out of five) each semester composed of high-performing students in terms of course grades. Because of this, in addition to the relatively small class size, the third-year classes are designed to combine language and content study. For me, this has been realized through the implementation of a syllabus focusing on audience-appropriate speeches in English concerning environmental content.

3. WHY SPEECHES?

While English continues to be an important medium in the field of hard sciences, students in the Faculty of Environmental Studies are not English majors. It would be unrealistic for the goal of the Language Communication course to be fluency as an English speaker, particularly when students are in class only 90 minutes per week. If it takes years for children in a naturalistic setting with hours of language exposure every day to become “fluent” in their first languages (Tomasetto, 2003), expecting the same in a second language from 90 minutes per week is not feasible. Instead, the focus of English instruction in a foreign language setting (EFL) often becomes the maximization of communicative opportunities while studying content skills for students’ future independent language growth (Hensley, 2009). In this sense, the traditional lecture-style course is ineffective. Furthermore, while communicative competence is important and a worthy goal of instruction (Brown, 2007), it cannot be achieved without cultural awareness (Cutrone, 2008). Therefore, in an attempt to meet all the above criteria, I have been implementing a syllabus based on audience-appropriate environmental science speeches in English. I believe such a syllabus is apt for several reasons.

First, in my experience via interviews on the first day of class, liberal arts-focused students vary greatly in what kind of jobs they want to have in the future, many often answering that they have not decided where they would like to see themselves after graduation. Science-focused students express a somewhat more limited variety of future plans, with jobs such as scientist/researcher, government official, and environmental activist often appearing. It appears it would be faulty to assume that all students will ultimately find themselves in careers directly related to hard/experimental science. Instead, a syllabus focused on a skill set applicable in a wider variety of situations in conjunction with environmental science content seems beneficial.

In recent years, syllabuses applying English for specific purposes (ESP) have become more prevalent (Hutchinson & Waters, 2006; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Jones, 1991). In an EFL classroom setting such as Japan where native-like fluency is not always paramount, studying a narrower range of language application can be more beneficial when balanced with content study in students’ area of study. An ESP syllabus also provides a more concrete goal for which to strive. When studying speeches, students’ progress can be readily observed and assessed. Furthermore, with a focus on concrete skills comes a lessened focus on grammar, which has traditionally been overemphasized in English education in Japan (Watanabe, 1997), and thus to which students have already been exposed to a great extent. For this reason as well, implementing an ESP syllabus focusing on speeches seems to be an appropriate alternative, especially when the benefits of being able to perform speeches on environmental topics in English in a variety of situations is taken into account.

A final possible (albeit less concrete) benefit of a speech-based syllabus is the potential for transfer of
skills to other areas. While not all aspects of a speech given to an English-speaking audience may apply to a Japanese audience, many public speaking skills are universal, for example, using good posture to demonstrate confidence (Harrington & LeBeau, 2009). These kinds of skills can also benefit learners at any language level, making them more appropriate for classes of mixed learners. Finally, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to verify, success in public speaking may have a positive knock-on effect for students who are beginning their job-hunting in earnest at the close of their third year at university; indeed, one former student reported just that on the semester-final course evaluation form. For all of the above reasons, I continue to believe that a syllabus of oral speeches is indeed appropriate for third-year university students in Japan, particularly when speech performance is focused on topics from students’ content area of study—in this case, environmental science.

4. ITERATIONS ON A THEME

That is not to say that every class from day one has been flawless, of course. Over the course of the past two years, I have tried a variety of implementations in regard to course content and method of speech assessment. In this section, I would like to give a brief overview of each semester’s syllabus and how it has directly influenced the subsequent semester. Before that is possible, however, a brief explanation of how the course textbook is organized is necessary.

4.1 Speaking of Speech

Based on the recommendation of a previous teacher in my same position, reinforced by the fact that the same textbook is regularly used at many universities in Japan (Cutrone, 2008), I have used Speaking of Speech by Harrington and LeBeau (2009) as the textbook for the course. Speaking of Speech is divided into three main sections: The Physical Message (body language), The Visual Message (creating and explaining visuals), and The Story Message (writing a structured speech). Each section is further subdivided into skills areas, such as posture and eye contact, gestures, and voice inflection as the three main sections of The Physical Message. The general format as provided in the textbook for a 15-session course is an every-other-week alternation between study and speech performance. This pace can of course be difficult for students who are non-English majors and presented itself as a problem, which will be addressed below.

4.2 Semester One

Because this was my first time teaching both the course and the textbook, this semester presented the most difficulties. Following Harrington and LeBeau’s (2009) plan, I implemented a syllabus in which every other week students were responsible to prepare and deliver a speech in class. Students were responsible for using the material covered in the previous week’s class to deliver an original speech. Also, as preparation for the final end-of-semester speech—naturally the course assessment which was weighted most heavily—each major section of the final speech (introduction, body, conclusion) was practiced in class in the weeks leading up to the last class when the final speeches were performed. This resulted in seven semester speeches (four formal and three informal) in addition to the final end-of-semester speech for a total of eight. In order to reduce student anxiety, the first two speeches were performed in small, rotating groups. All speeches throughout the semester were based on topics provided by the textbook such as introducing a city, demonstrating how to do something, and comparing two countries.

Not surprisingly, based on the official class evaluations completed by the students, both the liberal arts- and science-focused classes rated this semester the lowest of the four. Being the first semester, it is difficult to say to whether it was me as the instructor, the textbook, some other factor, or a combination of any of the above which caused lower evaluations, but the average score across both classes was 4.36 out of 5. This may seem relatively high, but when the Japanese tendency to maintain harmony, or wa, (Matsumoto & Boye Lafayette, 2000) is taken into account, the 0.64 average deficit may be rather telling. It was in this semester, however, that I received the student comment mentioned above that studying speeches and speech skills may help in job-hunting,
particularly in the area of interviews.

4.3 Semester Two

In an attempt to improve the overall structure of the course, in the second semester I altered the syllabus to focus not on the topics provided in the textbook, but instead chose to require students to make each speech on an environmental topic of their choice. This, of course, increased the burden of writing appropriate content for the students. At the same time, I eliminated the initial small groups-based speeches and made the first four speeches plenary. This was done partly out of logistical necessity as there were more students than usual in both classes. Furthermore, because of the high number of students, most of the semester speeches were delivered two at a time with the class divided into two halves, a less than ideal situation.

Due to the large student numbers and logistical problems, the average final grades for students across both classes fell as compared to the previous semester. The liberal arts class evaluated the course much higher than the first semester with a 0.26 increase in average score. However, the science-focused class, which had almost 50% more students, evaluated the class a mere 0.06 average points higher compared to the previous semester. This led me to conclude that, in addition to the overly large class size, having students perform all their speeches on self-selected environmental topics may have been too much of a language burden, causing speech performance to suffer. As a result, students were not employing audience-appropriate speech skills for an English audience. Since this was to be an important part of the curriculum, I felt this needed to be changed.

4.4 Semester Three

In an effort to find a happy medium, I reintroduced the initial small group speeches for the first three semester speeches. For speech content, all but the final speech were to be on the topics provided by the textbook. I felt this would allow students to focus more on the audience-appropriate factors of giving a speech in English such as body language and gestures, which would then culminate in a final end-of-semester speech concerning an environmental topic of their choice in which students would employ all the skills they had learned throughout the semester. The total number of speeches still remained at eight, with seven semester speeches (four formal and three informal/practice) and one final speech.

With this more balanced syllabus, the class evaluations completed by the students rose an average of 0.06 points in the liberal arts section and 0.18 in the science section. Students’ performance also improved overall with higher average final semester grades across both sections. However, despite this pleasant improvement in student evaluations and grades, I still felt that the semester-final speeches were not achieving the level I desired. Students were still responsible for preparing a new speech every two weeks by themselves outside of class. By this time, it had also become apparent that many students were not writing their speeches themselves, but had turned to online translator websites and copying from English sources for much of their content, resulting in speech content much too difficult and/or convoluted for both the students themselves and the class audience.

After contemplating the different changes I had made to the syllabus over three semesters, I realized that one of the few factors I had not yet tried to manipulate was the number and frequency of semester speeches. It occurred to me that students, while performing better and maintaining an overall higher opinion of the class, may not have been achieving their full potential for speech performance due to the burden of having to write speeches by themselves every other week. With this in mind, I implemented a somewhat more drastic change to the syllabus for my fourth semester.

5. COLLABORATIVE AND TASK-BASED

In an attempt to reconceptualize my syllabus, I turned to cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998; Kagan, 2007) and task-based learning (Ellis, 2006). Cooperative learning (CL), while not exactly prevalent in EFL, has shown success with both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups of language learners (for a brief review, see Hensley & Day, 2007) and Japanese EFL students (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kluge, 1999). Similarly, task-based learning (TBL)
employs the medium of a task to be completed for the purpose of eliciting language use from learners (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2006; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003). What both approaches share in common is the assigning of roles or jobs to each student in a (typically small) group and then giving the group a task which it must work together cooperatively to achieve. This is oversimplified, of course, but the potential pedagogical usefulness of such an approach should be apparent.

In order to help minimize the language burden on individual students, I decided to implement a collaborative task-based approach to my syllabus. Instead of doing a speech every other week, which students were to write and prepare for on their own, I decided to make each speech a pair effort. My hope was that this would take much of the burden of writing speeches off of each individual student and allow for more of a focus on speech skills and delivery. At the same time, I realized that, by eliminating one of the formal semester speeches, I would be able to provide class time for students to write their speeches. This should, in turn, enable me to play a more active role in students’ speech preparation, while also limiting the amount of translation/copying that would occur.

The format I decided on was a syllabus with collaborative speeches and more in-class preparation time that would be completed in pairs. Thus, a regular cycle of study, preparation, and performance would go something like the following.

5.1 Study

The first week of each cycle consists of textbook study. I introduce and explain the material to be covered (e.g., gestures). In a series of activity steps prescribed in Speaking of Speech (Harrington & LeBeau, 2009) progressing from receptive and repetitive to more productive and original, students become acclimated to the new skill. Next, we watch and analyze the sample speech provided on the DVD accompanying the textbook. Lastly, I introduce the assignment, topic, and guidelines for that cycle’s speech. Students form randomly selected pairs and each pair chooses its specific focus based on the given topic (e.g., explaining how to recycle a plastic bottle for a demonstration speech). The only homework assignment after this first day of the cycle is for each student pair to divide their speech’s material into halves and research content and visuals, which they are to bring to the following week’s class.

5.2 Preparation and Practice

Aided by a handout I prepare specifically for each speech cycle, pairs combine the material each member has researched and brought to class. The class then operates as a workshop, providing time for student pairs to synthesize their information, write their speech’s English content, check their contents with me, and begin practicing. In this format, I can monitor pairs’ progress and provide immediate feedback and help when necessary.

5.3 Performance

Sharing any visuals between them, students perform their speeches in pairs. While one partner is delivering his or her speech to the class, the second partner is responsible for changing slides. Simultaneously, each speaker is peer-evaluated by three other students in the audience. I also use a separate, more detailed rubric to assess each student’s performance. Once one partner has finished his or her speech, the second partner exchanges places and delivers the same speech. After all the pairs have finished their speeches, I have all the students complete a self-evaluation of their own performance. I then collect both the peer and self-evaluations and use them to help me provide individual written feedback for each student, which I distribute the following class.

6. RESULTS AND RESPONSE

Despite this being the first attempt at such a collaborative pair task-based speech syllabus, the results were encouraging (see Figure 1). While less overall speech content study took place (due to the elimination of one semester speech), students’ speech performances were consistently scored higher than previous semesters’ classes. As a result, the average final semester grades for both liberal arts and science sections were the highest of the four semesters.

Student evaluations were also rather telling. Overall, the two sections rated the course an average 0.3 points higher than the first semester for an average
of 4.66 out of 5, an overall 15% increase. Again, though, Japanese *wa* (Matsumoto & Boye Lafayette, 2000) may have played a part and should not be overlooked. One point of interest, which should be noted, was the 0.02 point decrease in the average score of the liberal arts section’s evaluations.

7. DISCUSSION

I was, naturally, rather pleased with the outcome of the fourth semester according to the collaborative task-based syllabus. The final class grades, as compared to the first semester, were an average 5.5% higher. The class evaluations were also the highest, on average, of the four semesters. The results were not without some discrepancy, however. As already mentioned, the liberal arts students evaluated the course 0.02 points lower than the third semester’s class. At first, I was concerned that this response might have meant students were not responding positively to the collaborative syllabus. After discussion with my supervising teacher, however, I learned that the third semester’s liberal arts class had been the highest-performing section. It is very likely that, being high-performing students, the class perceived it had been more successful, despite the syllabus’s having been more demanding in terms of workload than the fourth semester. This could have been the reason for the slight drop in evaluation scores.

Furthermore, this seems to be corroborated in the fourth semester’s science-focused class, as I was also informed that it had been the highest-performing group. Indeed, the fourth semester’s science section received both the highest average grades and rated the course more highly on its evaluations than the other three semesters’. It is encouraging to note, however, that the liberal arts section in the fourth semester rated the course only 0.02 average points lower than the previous, highest-performing semester’s class. While not confirmable from the present data, in the area of class evaluations the collaborative syllabus in the fourth semester may have nearly made up for the difference between the “regular” and the highest-performing class in terms of student self-perceptions of success in the course.

Along with course evaluations and average grades, I also observed improved performance in other areas. As part of the speeches, I usually have students prepare one content question to ask the class at the end of their speech. In previous semesters, the class audience was often at a loss for the answer, and I had to provide it myself. In the fourth semester, however, due to the collaborative nature of the speeches, the
student class audience heard every speech twice. I also instructed the pairs to hold their question until both students had finished their speech, so when the question was asked, students in the class audience were able to answer the question almost every time. The double exposure to the same content seems to have had a beneficial effect on students’ comprehension of the speeches.

Additionally, although the student audience heard every speech twice, the speech was not always exactly the same; each student in a pair employed slightly different vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation, and body language. This led to iterations of listening. In the past decade, research into language acquisition has revealed that language is learned through iterative use in which the learner’s mind constructs the language system through multiple activations of similar patterns and situations (Bybee, 2006; de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Tomasello, 2003). Thus, students were exposed to the same content in a slightly different way, which should have had a beneficial effect.

There were some disadvantages to the collaborative syllabus, however. As mentioned above, I had to eliminate one semester speech the textbook calls for, leaving less overall content covered in class. I chose to eliminate the visual speech concerned with designing and explaining visuals such as charts and graphs. Still, I felt this was an acceptable exchange for the collaborative framework and did so because students, being environmental science majors, already have much experience working with charts and graphs. I felt focusing on appropriate body language and speech structure was more important.

Another, more logistical, disadvantage to the collaborative syllabus was the student pairs themselves. While there did not appear to be any disagreements or altercations among partners, there were occasionally partners absent on the second day of the speech cycle when students were supposed to be preparing for their speech. This was unfortunate, as partners lost the time to work together under my supervision. To compensate, I paid more attention to any student whose partner was absent, providing as much help as possible while the present student worked on his or her half of the speech preparation. I also assigned new random partners for each speech cycle, meaning students only had the same partner once, lowering the odds that the same student would be without a partner on the preparation day more than once. Despite this potential disadvantage, though, I still feel that student partners would be better than small groups of three students. The class audience took well to listening to the same speech two times from each pair, but listening to the same speech three times might be overdoing it.

Additionally, in order to better comprehend how students felt about the collaborative class design, I distributed a delayed post-course questionnaire (see Appendices). The questionnaire was entirely anonymous and voluntary. As only a fraction of the questionnaires were completed and returned, however, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about students’ reactions as a whole. Still, including a few student comments on the course seems appropriate at this point.

First, there seems to be a mix of students who have and have not had experience performing speeches in English in the past. Performing speeches, particularly in English, appears to be a novel experience for many. Students who responded as having English public speaking experience noted that said experience was from junior high school (a minimum of five years previous) and consisted mainly of memorizing simple compositions. Thus, it seems as if students could benefit from exposure to this type of public speaking course.

One question on the questionnaire (item 6: see Appendices) addressed how effective students felt the partner-based syllabus was. In the few responses received, there were no negative feelings toward the collaborative design. However, students did express some reservation about the potential for one partner relying too much on the other, essentially freeloading through the preparation portion of the speech cycle. Naturally, while students were working with their partners, I was constantly monitoring their progress. I also believe that students’ performance on speeches typically strongly reflected the amount of preparation they put into them. Still, adding an element of peer review for the preparation step in the cycle may help.
Another interesting discovery from the questionnaire was that, while not all students thought they would need to deliver English speeches in the future, all students positively responded to a question on whether they felt the speech skills covered in class would be of use to them in their future (item 8: see Appendices). Again, while not all students from any one department or faculty will go on to careers in that specific area, it would appear that studying a broader skill set may be beneficial in the future.

One last point of interest is students’ responses to the question of whether they felt performing speeches in English would benefit their environmental science study and/or job in the future (item 9: see Appendices). Of the collected questionnaires, all students responded in the affirmative to this answer. Moreover, one student, in the free comment section at the end of the questionnaire, wrote that studying and performing speeches had greatly increased his/her self-confidence, and that this would undoubtedly be beneficial in the future.

According to the above advantages, and despite the above disadvantages, the collaborative task-based framework of paired speeches seems to have been successful, both in terms of course performance as assessed by myself as the instructor and students’ perception of the course itself. This is not to imply that the course is perfect as-is; modifications in order to improve the overall flow of the class as well as student speech performances are still important. In the current semester (my fifth), I am again using the collaborative syllabus. However, I am having student pairs do their first speeches in small, rotating groups instead of plenary speeches from the beginning. I hope this will further reduce students’ anxiety in regards to both speaking and performing a speech.

8. CONCLUSION

This report on my Language Communication classes has been an endeavor to both review what I have attempted thus far and reflect on the syllabus choices I have made, as well as my reasons for making them. In teaching, it seems hard to imagine that a perfect syllabus can exist; when dealing with different groups of people, it most likely cannot. Thus, teaching becomes not only a process of providing opportunities for learning to students, but also one which is constantly evolving.

In an EFL setting such as Japan, where learners are not surrounded by English and have few opportunities to practice using what they have studied for years, a more skill-based language syllabus seems to be worthwhile. Employing ESP in order to provide (non-English major) learners with a skill set that may benefit them beyond the walls of the classroom once the course has ended seems an effective way to go about doing just that. In my first attempt at such a syllabus, students have responded positively, and their mastery of the skills involved, by my assessment, has increased. A collaborative pair syllabus of audience-appropriate speeches in English, including body language and speech structure, does seem to be a valuable direction in which to take such a course. I plan to continue using—and adapting—such a syllabus in the future.

9. REFERENCES


10. APPENDICES

Appendix A
授業に関するアンケート

1. 授業以前に、英語でのスピーチを勉強したことがありましたか？ □はい □いいえ
   a. 「はい」と答えた場合、いつ／どこ／なぜ／どんなふうに勉強しましたか?

2. 授業で一番役に立ったことは何でしたか？（勉強したことの中で、あなたにとって何が一番よかったと思いますか？

3. 何が一番に役立たなかったと思いますか？それはどうしてですか？

4. 授業では、何が一番楽しかったですか？

5. 何が一番楽しくなかったですか？

6. パートナー制でスピーチの勉強、準備、練習、実践することに関してどう思いましたか？
   □とても効果的
   □まあまあ効果的
   □どちらともいえない
   □あまり効果がなかった
   □ほとんど効果がなかった
   a. どうして、その答えを選びましたか？

7. あなたの将来にとって、英語でスピーチすることはどれくらい役に立つと思いますか？
   □とても役に立つ
   □分多役に立つ
   □どちらともいえない
   □あまり役立たない
   □ほとんど役立たない

8. 授業で学んだスピーチのスキルはどれくらい役に立つと思いますか？
   □とても役に立つ
   □分多役に立つ
   □どちらともいえない
   □あまり役立たない
   □ほとんど役立たない

9. 英語でスピーチをすることは、今後環境科学の勉強や仕事等に役に立つと思いますか？
   □はい □いいえ

10. もし、他に感想や意見、提案等があれば、自由に書いてください。
Appendix B
Class Questionnaire

1. Before our class, had you ever studied giving speeches in English before? □ Yes □ No
   a. If yes, when/where/why/how did you study it?

2. What was the most helpful aspect of class?
   What did we study that helped you the most?

3. What was the least helpful? Why didn’t it help?

4. What did you enjoy the most about the class?

5. What did you enjoy the least about the class?

6. What is your opinion of the partner speech cycle? (study—prepare—perform)
   □ Very effective
   □ Somewhat effective
   □ Don’t know
   □ Somewhat ineffective
   □ Very ineffective
   a. Why did you choose that answer for 6a?

7. How useful do you feel that giving speeches in English will be for your future?
   □ Very useful
   □ Probably useful
   □ Don’t know
   □ Probably not useful
   □ Almost not useful at all

8. How useful do you feel that the speech skills we studied will be for your future (career, study, goals, etc.)?
   □ Very useful
   □ Probably useful
   □ Don’t know
   □ Probably not useful
   □ Almost not useful at all

9. Do you feel that giving speeches in English will help your future pursuits in environmental science?

10. If you have any other comments, suggestions, ideas, or opinions that you would like to share, please write them below.