Guidelines for Syllabus in Language Communication A: To Build Better Communication Skills (Part I)

Masako Matsuda

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) in Nagasaki University, was set up in 1997 as a new field, since society has come to recognize the importance of impending problems regarding environmental issues in the future. The Faculty’s interdisciplinary research including both science and humanities was considered to be the most important aspect in approaching these problems, and the department offers a wide range of subjects.

Communication ability in English was supposed to be very important for students in adjusting themselves to international society, for setting up global partnerships, and for cooperation with other countries in searching for the way to a solution. According to the rationale explained in the documents submitted to the Ministry of Education for accreditation (Faculty of Environmental Studies in Nagasaki University 1996), the purpose of English courses is to develop students’ communicative skills in English to enable them to discuss global environmental issues with people from different countries.

However, this goal is fairly ambitious judging from the constraints of English education in FES at present, where there is one full-time English teacher, one class per week in the third year, and few facilities and resources for studying English. Richterich and Chancerel (1977: 4) define curriculum as “all the means employed to attain the objectives: teacher, teaching materials, technical aids, methods, timetable etc.” According to them, it seems rather difficult to reach its goals with the current English curriculum.

In addition, it is essential to achieve correlation between English courses for General Education (GE) for the first two years and those for FES in the third year, and to establish a coherent English Language Teaching (ELT) method of approach, design, and procedure (Richard and Rodgers 1986: 29), in view of the limited number of English classes in the whole curriculum of the university. However, there are not any opportunities at the moment to set up such coordination. What can be done at present might be restricted to designing and improving course guidelines for English in FES, namely, Language Communication (LC) A1 and AII, so that English teachers could refer to them when writing their syllabuses. Later as a second phase, changes should be sought for GE and LC integration in order to unite all English courses.

Regarding a course design, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 65) identify the procedure as (1) producing a syllabus, (2) selecting, adapting or writing materials in accordance with the syllabus, (3) developing a methodology for teaching those materials, and (4) establishing evaluation procedures by using the theoretical and empirical information available.

Also, Graves (1996: 12) elaborates on a syllabus design and makes her framework “needs assessment, determining goals and objectives, conceptualising content, selecting and developing materials and activities, organization of content and activities, evaluation, and consideration of
resources and constraints.” By applying these concepts to course development in FES, this essay will investigate the design issues and suggest alternative guidelines for LC AI and All.

After examining the current curriculum for ES in the next chapter, literature of English for Specific Purposes was reviewed as a theoretical basis for improvement. Needs of teachers and students in FES were identified by using questionnaires, and analysis and discussion for language description necessary for syllabus and effective methodology followed. Finally, the way to help standardise assessment was sought after, reaching the conclusion that feedback would be a recurring process to fit syllabuses to learning situations.

CHAPTER 2. BACKGROUND

As a starting point, the entire teaching circumstances as a whole were inspected in this chapter: that is, the overall rationale, goals for English courses, their course descriptions, timetable, class size and teaching staff, teaching and learning resources, placement tests and evaluation.

The rationale for FES is to help create environmental specialists, by cultivating students’ critical thinking and problem-solving abilities to cope with future changes in the world, and eventually contribute to improving the global environment in some way. Students are to choose one of the two courses: the Environmental Policy Course or the Environmental Preservation and Design Course, after learning the fundamental environmental studies (ES) in both science and humanities in the first year. LC AI and All are required subjects for the third-year students in both courses as basics.

2.1. Goals of the English Courses

Identifying learning goals, the first step in the development of a language programme (Nunan 1988a: 24), begins with examining the documents which were submitted to the Ministry of Education (Faculty of Environmental Studies 1996). They were to explain why each subject in the planned curriculum was necessary.

According to this paper, English courses in FES were important for developing students’ practical and working knowledge of English, as well as their competency. It is assumed that in the future students may have to discuss environmental problems in international society, make proposals on them, work in co-operation with other countries, and do research for technical development by using English. As a result, English became one of 13 common subjects for two courses in the faculty.

2.2. Course Descriptions which Determine Objectives of English Classes

The Preparation Committee of Academic Affairs in FES designed all of the curriculum and the course descriptions as part of the procedures for accreditation. These descriptions of LC AI and All regulated the objectives of the courses.

The goals mentioned above can be generally interpreted as communicative competence. However, emphasis on education in LC AI moved to simply reading texts on ES. The reason is that reading has been the most important aspect in English education in Japan, and still is even now. Especially, in the Environmental Preservation and Design Course reading ability is essential to check the recent trend in research. Accordingly, it seems that reading is emphasized as well as communicative competence.

2.2.1. The Course Description of LC AI

The following is the course description of LC AI:

“Language communication ability is all-round competence which is composed of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These four skills should be effectively developed in relation to each other, as a basis for vocational
education and academic research. However, for the sake of convenience of English education in FES, these four areas are divided into two categories: one is aural and oral, and the other is visual-reading and writing.

The objective of this subject is to learn the language structure and develop expertise and vocabulary in the specialized area, both by rapid reading of many introductory English texts and by close reading of representative ones on environmental issues. In addition, students' ability to express themselves in English should be cultivated by summarising the reading materials and by making written comments on them.

2.2.2. The Course Description of LC AII

The course description of LC AII is as follows:

"The main objective of this course is to build up aural and oral communication abilities by using different kinds of educational facilities. Because skills in listening and speaking have been neglected for a long time in teaching English in Japan, there is still a considerable gap between abilities in reading and writing, and those in speaking and listening even in specialized education. Therefore, basic training in aural and oral English is still necessary for the time being. Various kinds of practice should be done with the aim of developing listening and self-expression abilities both for everyday life and for the academic situation."

2.3. The Current Courses and Timetable

Before taking LC AI and AII in their third year, students in FES are required to learn Comprehensive English I, II, III, and IV, and English Communication I, which a teacher of a native speaker usually teaches, and English Communication II in GE for the first two years. Each class takes place once a week and the class length is 90 minutes. The following are the current classes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st year (GE)</th>
<th>2nd year (GE)</th>
<th>3rd year</th>
<th>4th year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st semester</td>
<td>Comprehensive English I</td>
<td>Comprehensive English II</td>
<td>Language Communication I</td>
<td>no English classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd semester</td>
<td>English Communication I</td>
<td>Comprehensive English III</td>
<td>2nd semester</td>
<td>Language Communication II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>1st semester</td>
<td>Comprehensive English IV</td>
<td>2nd semester</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>2nd semester</td>
<td>no English classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2.3: English classes in FES

Thus the number of the classes for GE is three times more than English for ES; therefore, correlation between these two is essential for effective teaching.

2.4. Class Size and Teaching Staff

The prescribed number of the regular students in FES is 140 and the third-year students are divided into six English classes: three in the Environmental Policy Course and another three in the Environmental Preservation and Design Course. Therefore, the average class size is 23 or 24, and some students who failed in the previous year join each class occasionally.

As for the teaching staff in 2002, two native speakers (part-time teachers) and one Japanese (a full-time teacher) taught three classes in the Environmental Policy Course, and three part-time teachers (two native speakers and another Japanese lecturer) were in charge of the classes in the Environmental Preservation and Design Course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2002 year</th>
<th>LC AI</th>
<th>LC AII</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2.4-1: Teaching staff and numbers of students in each class
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In the year of 2003, it is planned that the faculty will provide eight English classes. Each class will be 17 or 18 students, which is an ideal class size for getting students involved into various activities. Additional two classes will be taught by a part-time, native speaker. Thus, classes in FES will reach rather idealistic size, whereas those in GE still consist of a large number of students. Officially for FES, class size of Comprehensive English (GE) is 47 and that of English Communication is 35, however, students who failed in the same subject in the previous year join each class every semester. From a language teacher's viewpoint, such large classes are difficult to manage properly. In studying English from communicative approach, most Japanese learners should have two kinds of barriers, psychological and cultural. Although they are accustomed to being passive and quiet in class, students' active involvement is essential. While Japanese teachers themselves are used to lecture style teaching, small class size makes it easier for both teachers and students to clear such obstacles.

2.5. Teaching and Learning Resources

All the classrooms in FES are provided with a VCR, a DVD player, and an OHP, which can project pictures onto a big screen. However, with regard to software, there were neither collections of teaching materials nor learning resources, such as books, video tapes, DVDs, cassette tapes, and self-learning materials for English qualification tests, to which both teachers and students have access.

From 2001 a certain amount of budget is allotted to provide students with learning resources. What kind of materials should be prepared and how to make them accessible to students is the next step in this area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st year</th>
<th>English Communication I</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>Students registering 2nd time</th>
<th>Total no. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st semester</td>
<td>Group a</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group b</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group c</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group d</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive English I</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd semester</td>
<td>English Communication II</td>
<td>Group a</td>
<td>native speaker</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group b</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group c</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group d</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive English II</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Comprehensive English III</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st semester</td>
<td>Comprehensive English IV</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2.4-2 : The Number of Students
2.6. Placement Tests and Evaluation

Placement tests have not been conducted to distribute students into six classes according to their level; however, the Academic Affairs Office collected each student's records of English courses for GE, and according to their grades students were divided into three ranks.

The problem is that students' scores do not always correlate with their English proficiency. There are no prescribed levels set as a goal, which students should reach after the courses; therefore, each teacher gives their own test and evaluates in accordance with their own standard. As for the goal and evaluation, the situation is the same for Language Communication AI and AI.

Issues surrounding ESP are considered in the next chapter in order to find appropriate theoretical support for a course design, then, needs analyses were conducted in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3. ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

In order to think about a course design, it is indispensable to review the history and contemporary paradigms of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and its sub-division, EAP (English for Academic Purposes). ESP is one of the more recently advanced areas in ELT, and its fundamental ideas and definitions are examined in this section.

3.1. The Origins and the Development of ESP

ESP was separated from English for general purposes, and originated for mainly two reasons in the late 1960s. When time and money invested for learning English was limited, it has "created a need for cost-effective courses with clearly defined goals" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 7).

There was another factor which accelerated the growth of ESP. From pedagogical viewpoints, learners and their attitudes to learning have been highlighted, becoming the most important elements in the success of teaching. One of the components which accelerate students' motivation is assumed to be the introduction of set texts chosen in their specialised

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Figure 3.2: Factors affecting ESP course design by Hutchinson and Waters
field to meet the learners' needs and interests.

During the course of its development, ESP's main focuses evolved from (1) register analysis to (2) rhetorical or discourse analysis, (3) target situation analysis, (4) the skills and strategies centred approach, and (5) a learning-centred approach. Also, ESP has aimed to teach English to satisfy the needs of a specific group of learners, the course design often having been "a substantial and important part of the workload" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 21) for the teacher.

3.2. Course Design

An ESP course consists of three components: (1) needs analysis (who? why? where? and when?), (2) language descriptions (what?), and (3) learning theories (how?), according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 22). These constituents: a needs analysis, syllabus based on language descriptions, and methodology applying recent learning theories will be described in the following sections.

3.3. Needs Analysis

Observing that most language teachers are always "busily changing sections or creating additional material", Tarone and Yule (1989: 3) conclude that "at a very practical level, they must constantly adjust their methods and materials on the basis of their identification of the local needs of their students," and assume that "no two foreign language classes are ever the same." They emphasize the importance of a needs analysis of each class; however, it has more significance for ESP. Robinson (1991: 3) asserts that since a time period for the course is specified, "collaboration and negotiation among all those involved with the course organisers, teachers, sponsors and students" is essential. Therefore, to identify their needs is regarded as the first procedure for designing ESP courses. West (1994) classifies six types of needs based on Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Tarone and Yule (1989). Five of them seem relevant in needs analysis in English classes in FES.

1) Necessities: "what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 55);

2) Lacks: the course designer "needs to know what the learner knows already", so that s/he can "decide which of the necessities the learner lacks" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 55-6);

3) Wants: "what the learners want or feel they need" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 57);

4) Learning strategies: "the learner’s preferred learning strategies for progressing from where they are ... to where they want to go” (West 1994: 4) and learner’s expectations or "preconceptions about the form a language learning experience should take” (Tarone and Yule 1989: 9);

5) Constraints: "the potential and constraints of the learning situation,” or “the external factors which may include resources (staff, accommodation, time) available, the prevailing attitudes or culture, and the materials, aids and methods available” (West 1994: 4).

3.4. Syllabuses: Type A and Type B

Breen (1987) classifies four prototypical syllabuses, (1) Formal, (2) Functional, (3) Task-Based, and (4) Process type. As for language teaching, two approaches to syllabuses are more common: product-oriented Type A, and process-oriented Type B (White 1988: 44-5). Nunan (1988b: 27) defines Type A syllabuses as “those in which the focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction.” In contrast, Allen (1984: 65 in White 1988: 45) argues that a Type B syllabus “aims to immerse the learners in real-life communication without any artificial pre-selection or arrangement of items.” “During the 1970s, communicative views of language teaching began to be incorporated into syllabus design” (White
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1988: 11), and as a result, Type B syllabus caught the attention of ELT teachers.

In Type B it is essential to find tasks with which students can communicate in a meaningful way. Prabhu (1987: 46-7) selects three types of tasks: (1) information-gap activity, (2) reasoning-gap activity, and (3) opinion-gap activity.

In college level, it is desirable for learners to have some time to reflect the results of their activities when they enjoy those of Type B syllabus. As an adult, they need to understand clear picture of learning processes besides having fun in activities. Therefore, the combination of Type A and B seems desirable.

3.5. Methodology

In traditional approaches to ELT, considering methodology has been totally different from designing a syllabus. Nevertheless, Nunan maintains that recently deficiencies in "this lack of integration have become apparent" (1988b: 76).

Again, this change is due to communicative language teaching. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 167) give the useful insight to language teachers that "(m)aking the methodology more interactive and enjoyable can be a valuable weapon in countering demands for subject-specific ESP." They also claim that language learning is not a matter of systematic linguistic knowledge but an emotional and incidental experience. "The medicine of relevance may still need to be sweetened with the sugar of enjoyment, fun, creativity and a sense of achievement. ESP, as much as any good teaching, needs to be intrinsically motivating" (1987: 48). These premises on learning seem significant in creating more attractive methods for English classes. Another hypothesis that "(l)earning is not just a mental process, it is a process of negotiation between individuals and society" (1987: 72) has implication for an ESP course design.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 65) identify three main types of approach to methodology: language-centred, skills-centred, and learning-centred. They advocate the third course design because it concerns the learner at every stage of planning.

They also analyse the situation of ESP and skill developing:

"If the ESP course is designed in terms of goals, there is in effect a tacit admission that a large number of students will fail the course. Since ESP is by its very nature a process that is intended to enable people to achieve a purpose, it is at best a little odd to frame the course in such a way as to almost predict failure. The process-oriented approach tries to avoid this problem by removing the distinction between the ESP course and the target situation.... (They) are seen as a continuum of constantly developing degrees of proficiency with no cut-off point of success or failure. The emphasis in the ESP course, then, is not on achieving a particular set of goals, but on enabling the learners to achieve what they can within the given constraints.... In essence it (the skill-centred model) sees the ESP course as helping learners to develop skills and strategies which will continue to develop after the ESP course itself. Its aim is not to provide a specified corpus of linguistic knowledge but to make the learners into better processors of information." (1987: 69-70) (Parentheses are the author's)

This view can be applied to LC, because the target situation is considerably high in spite of the limited class hours. (The End of Part I)

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