Ug! A task-based oral communication course for H.S.

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In 2006 a new oral communication course was taught to first year students at Hosei Daini High School. The objectives of the course were to improve the students' ability and motivation to communicate in English. A task-based syllabus was made the core of the OC course, providing students with opportunities for outcome-orientated communication to facilitate language acquisition and thereby improve oral communication ability. In order to increase motivation, tasks were designed to be interesting, to be personalized and to help increase self-confidence. The course was successful in improving the communication ability of the students while motivation to speak English dropped slightly over the year.

　2006年度、法政第二高校一年生を対象に新しいオーラルコミュニケーションコースが使用された。コースの目的は、英語でのコミュニケーション能力及びモティベーションの向上を目指すことにあった。コースの中心となるのはタスクベース・シラバスであり、学生の言語習得を促進するため、またそれによって彼らのオーラルコミュニケーション能力の向上につなげるために、目的達成型のコミュニケーションを行う機会が多く提供されている。そしてモティベーションを向上させるために、コースのタスクは学生が興味を持つような内容になっており、学生それぞれの情報を使用することで彼らの自信につなげられるようになっている。コースの成果に関しては、学生のコミュニケーション能力向上という点では成功を収めたが、英語を話すことに対しての学生のモティベーションの向上という点では若干下降した。

This paper presents the justification, design and evaluation of a task-based Oral Communication (OC) course taught to first year students at Hosei Daini High School (Hosei II HS) in 2006.

In the Situation section, the situation and how it created the need for and later influenced the design of the course, is described. The Justification section of the paper examines the arguments for the use of analytic syllabuses in terms of theory and research in second language acquisition. The Design section outlines in detail the course syllabus and methodology. The Evaluation section of the paper looks at evidence from recordings

of students' interaction, teachers' and coordinators' feedback, student questionnaires and assessment to evaluate whether the course achieved its objectives or not.

Situation

The students

There are 620 1st year students at Hosei II HS. Entrance to the school is via examination, recommendation or graduation from the connected junior high school. All the students have already had three years of compulsory English classes, amounting to approximately 400 classroom hours of study. The results of 900 interview tests carried out in 2005 showed that most students enter Hosei II HS with a very low level of English oral communication. The students' motivation to communicate in English is not high. Results of a questionnaire completed by 125 first year students at the beginning of the 2006 school year showed that only 40% were strongly motivated to communicate in English with a remaining 60% being only a little or not motivated.

The 1st year English course (2006-7)

The first year students had six 50-minute periods of English per week composed of:

- four periods of English I – a grammar and reading course, based on the Yakudoku (Grammar-translation) method;

- one period of English I Writing – a writing course based on the Yakudoku method;

- one period of Oral Communication.

OC course

Students have one 50-minute period of Oral Communication per week. This amounts to about 28 periods or 24 classroom hours per school year. In each period there are two native speaking teachers and one Japanese coordinator per class of 44-45 students. Classes are split in half giving one native speaking teacher per 22-23 students. The coordinator moves between the two classrooms to maintain discipline, give support where necessary and to be the legal presence in case of any serious problems.

Objectives

1. To improve the students' communication ability;

2. To improve the students' motivation to communicate in English.

These two objectives were derived from the Course of Study (Ministry of Education, 2003b), a part of Monkasho's Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" (Ministry of Education, 2003a).

Justification

How do we achieve our first objective, to improve the students' communicative ability? What kind of syllabus are we going to use to facilitate language acquisition?

Analytic and synthetic syllabuses

In synthetic syllabuses, "...different parts of language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a

process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up...” (Wilkins, 1976, p. 2). In these syllabuses, language teaching is seen as the presentation of pieces of language, for example grammatical structures, notions or functions, to the language learner who then internally synthesizes these pieces into their total language system.

Analytic syllabuses however, updated here by Long and Crookes (1993), “... present the target language whole chunks at a time, in molar rather than molecular units, without linguistic interference or control.” (p. 11). The term *analytic* is referring to the role of the learner as analyzer of the presented language and their ability to recognize and then utilize the patterns contained within.

Problems with synthetic syllabuses

The validity of the belief that language can be acquired either immediately or gradually as linguistic units has for a long time been seriously in question. Stern (1983) and Lightbown and Spada (1999) present strong evidence of the practical failure of synthetic syllabuses to help students to acquire language.

Studies of second language acquisition offered an explanation of why synthetic syllabuses didn’t and couldn’t work. Corder (1967) and the morpheme studies of Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) coupled with studies of L2 learners without grammatical instruction (e.g. Bailey, Madden, & Krashen, 1974) showed that grammatical development seemed to follow an internally decided set order with multiple linguistic items all moving through a gradual

development from zero ability to accurate usage at the same time.

Ellis (2003), who uses the term *linguistic* instead of *synthetic*, writes:

> Linguistic syllabuses, then, are seen as inadequate because they result in fruitless attempts to interrupt the cognitive processes involved in interlanguage development, which involve the progressive mapping of forms and functions and the attendant restructuring of existing L2 knowledge. (p. 208)

In other words, synthetic syllabuses don’t work because languages are not acquired in that way.

Problems with analytic syllabuses

Sheen (1994) showed that even in immersion programs where students had a large amount of time communicating in L2, fully accurate use of linguistic structures did not develop. In order to counter this “fossilization”, it was argued that some focus on form was needed: “[Formal] instruction, it is widely believed, can help to prevent the premature fossilization which an excessive emphasis on the performance of communicative tasks may bring, and can assist learners, especially adults, to learn more rapidly and efficiently” (Tonkyn, 1994, p. 6). Tonkyn’s second point above sets out another position against the use of analytic syllabuses. This belief is that though linguistic elements may not be a necessary condition for language acquisition, they do speed it up. The OC syllabus will therefore be an analytic one but will also include a focus on form.

Course design

SLA principles

Language will be presented to the students as undivided chunks and they will be expected to take from this data new patterns and lexis to build their interlanguage, thereby improving their oral communication ability. In order for them to do this "building" students need the opportunity for output, and not only output, but interaction or, simply put, a chance to communicate. Students must have a chance to engage in meaningful interaction, to communicate, and tasks provide this chance.

What is a task?

For the OC course at Hosei II HS, a task is defined as "a piece of work designed to produce oral communication." The phrase *a piece of work* highlights the idea of the completeness of a task and the necessity for some kind of outcome. The term *communication*, the transfer of meaning between minds, was used to highlight the focus on *meaning* of a task as opposed to focus on *form*. The OC course design centers around tasks. The kind of tasks that would be used on the course will now be discussed.

Task typologies - theory and trials

A variety of tasks based on the typologies of Prabhu (1987) and Willis (1996, p. 121) were trialed with first year students in 2005. The tasks ranged from simple information gap tasks to more involved decision-making tasks. Based on observations of these trials it was decided that the new OC course would begin with information gap tasks and later use creative and more complex decision-making tasks. Tasks would be predominantly pair work but with some small group work. Whole class interaction tasks would be included as these seemed to be motivating for all students even if production lacked complexity.

Motivation

In order to improve students' motivation, our second objective, three "commandments" from Dörnyei and Csizer's (1998) work and explicated in Dörnyei (2001), were chosen as course design guidelines. These are the beliefs that a course should increase self-confidence, be interesting, and be personalized.

Increase self-confidence (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 86-97)

1. Success – "There is no better recipe for building someone's self-confidence than to administer regular doses of success" Dörnyei (2001, p. 89). Challenging tasks can provide students with a feeling of success through successful completion of a task.

2. Language Anxiety – Research by Arnold (2003) suggests that using authentic listening material reduces students' anxiety by showing them that natural communication is not as "correct" as they might believe.

Be interesting (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 75-77)

1. A challenge – As mentioned before, tasks needed to be designed that were challenging for the students.

2. Interesting content – During the 2005 school year students had to write a speech about one of their interests. A list of these interests from one class was examined and this information was used to inform the choice of lesson topics.

3. Novelty – As much variety as possible was included in the new course. It was decided that each class would have a different topic to maximize novelty.

4. Fantasy – During the 2005 task trials, students seemed to enjoy tasks in which they were able to use their imagination and creative ability. Design tasks were incorporated into the new course for this reason.

5. Competition – The young men at Hosei II HS are generally very competitive and it was decided to use this in the OC course, balanced with co-operative elements.

6. Humor – Humor was woven into the course as much as possible. A caveman character called Ug was developed and cartoon strips and graphics featuring Ug were used throughout the textbook.

Be personalized

The importance of personalization can be found throughout Dörnyei (2001) and is also a central concept in Waldorf education as reflected in the concept of "Moving from the center outward" (Finser, 1994, p. 83). It was considered important that students had plenty of opportunity to talk about themselves and their situation before moving on to engage in tasks to do with "the rest of the world." To this end it was decided that many of the first term and about half the second term tasks would be personalized tasks.

The task cycle

The OC course is taught 50 minutes per week for 28 weeks a year. Given the week or more between classes it was decided that each lesson would be completely separate. This meant that the task cycle would fit within one 50-minute period. This is the task cycle that was use:

1. Vocabulary Brainstorming – Students provided vocabulary on the topic.

2. Authentic Listening – A recording of pairs of native speakers performing the task.

3. Task – The students perform the task.

Student assessment

Students at Hosei II HS receive a grade for the Oral Communication course which makes up about one sixth of the students' English grade for the first year. These grades are very important to students at Hosei II HS as a grade

point average of 3.5 is necessary for them to go directly into Hosei University without the need for the usual entrance examinations. The English department set a mean score of 6 (on a scale of 1-10) for the OC assessment system.

Ongoing performance assessment was chosen as the method of student assessment. "In performance assessment, real life or simulated assessment exercises are used to elicit original responses, which are directly observed and rated by a qualified judge" (Gipps, 1994, p. 99). Based on Skehan (1998, p. 177-180), it was decided that fluency, complexity and accuracy would be used as three scales of measurement of oral communication ability. A *communication* component was added to reflect the students' efforts at utilizing interactive language; giving feedback, checking and asking for further information. Teachers assessed students according to a 1-10 scale on each of the four elements as they performed tasks.

There was another reason for the choice of these four scales for student assessment. The OC course did not yet have sufficient focus on form and there was concern about the fossilization of students' language development. The decision to measure complexity and accuracy was therefore made in an attempt to push students to try and produce more complex and accurate language and in doing so, avoid the possibility of fossilization.

Course evaluation

Did our course achieve its objectives of improving communicative ability and motivation to speak English?

Did the OC course improve students' oral communication ability?

Recorded data – overview

Four pairs of student volunteers were recorded performing information-gap tasks at the end of the first term and at the end of the last term. Each recording was divided in two sections. In the Left section, the student on the left is giving information while the student on the right is receiving the information. In the Right section these roles are reversed.

It should be noted that the recorded data was not subject to a formal statistical analysis so no claims can be made for the statistical significance of these figures.

Recorded data – fluency

Fluency was measured as the number of words produced per second.
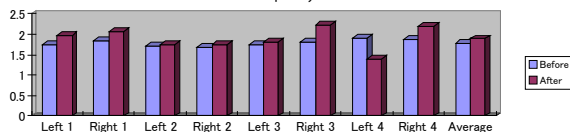
Table 1. Fluency
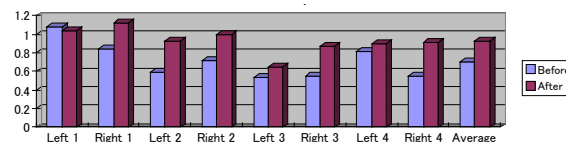
The figures (see Table 1) show an average 30% improvement in fluency over the course of the year.

Recorded data – complexity

To measure complexity, the recorded data was divided into clauses and the average number of words per clause was calculated.
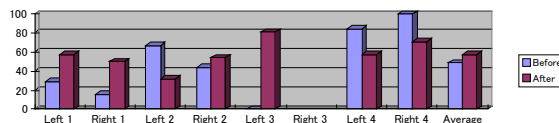
Table 2. Complexity

The figures show an average 6% improvement in complexity over the course of the year (see Table 2).

Recorded data – accuracy

The students' complexity was low, making measures of accuracy difficult. Accuracy was measured by calculating the percentage of plural countable nouns with an *s* correctly added.
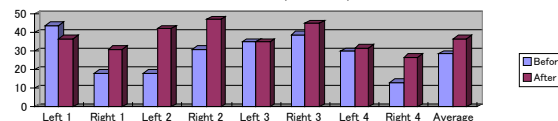
Table 3. Accuracy

The figures (Table 3) show an average 18% improvement in accuracy over the course of the year.

Recorded data – communication (interaction)

To measure the amount of communication, the ratio of *listener* utterances to *speaker* utterances was calculated as a percentage.

Table 4. Communication (interaction)

The figures show an average 30% improvement in communication (interaction) over the course of the year (Table 4).

Ongoing performance assessment

An informal analysis of the results of ongoing performance assessment shows a general improvement in students' grades over the year. Scores from 1-10 were given for each of the four scales giving a maximum score of 40 for each term. Scores rose from around 20/40 in the first term to 24/40 in the third, an increase of 10%. As also reflected in the analysis of our recorded data, improvement in fluency and communication scores were the most marked, with an increase of around 12%, complexity improved slightly less at 9% and accuracy showing a slight improvement at 6%.

The data from the ongoing performance testing reflects the recorded data and shows an all round increase in students communication ability over the period of the course.

Coordinators' feedback

The seven Japanese coordinators were asked whether they felt that the students' communicative ability had improved over the course of the year. Six of the seven teachers gave a positive response while one of them responded with "I can't say for certain." Three of the teachers gave strong positive answers, while three of the teachers weakened their responses with the comments "but not so much," "on the whole," and "just a little." Strongly positive respondents cited evidence from students use of English in English I classes as well as observations of the OC classes.

The low complexity of the language the students used was a cause for concern for several of the coordinators with one respondent writing, "The students have definitely got used to communicating in English, even though they do so mainly in words and phrases," while another wrote, "The students prefer gestures to communicate with their friends." Another coordinator seemed to agree with this idea but pointed to improvement over the year, "By the end of the year students seemed to be able to express themselves more deeply. Listeners were less passive and the language used was more complex."

The coordinator's feedback reflects our recorded and assessment data pointing to an improvement in students' communication ability over the year.

Student questionnaire

A total of 145 students were asked whether they felt their Oral Communication had improved. Fifty-four percent answered in the affirmative, 33% answered that they didn't know, and 13% answered in the negative.

It is encouraging that so many students believed that their communication ability had improved.

Did the OC course improve the students' motivation to communicate in English?

There are two kinds of motivation to communicate in English talked about in this section. One of them we will call a *general* motivation to communicate in English, whether in the classroom or out of it. It is believed that this is the objective which the Monkasho Course of Study 2003 is referring to. The other type of motivation is *classroom* motivation: motivation to engage in the OC classes.

Teachers' feedback

Teachers felt that there was some increase in students' classroom motivation over the course of the year. Observations of increased participation in all elements of the class were made.

One factor that suggests an increase in general motivation was students arriving early for the class and being willing to engage in English conversation with both each other and the teachers. Much to the teachers' surprise, incidences of this type of behaviour increased during the course, and suggest an improvement in general motivation.

The ongoing assessment system seemed to have a large effect on classroom motivation. Students wanted a good grade in OC and made great effort while the teacher was watching them and making their grade. As mentioned before, grades are vital to the students for entry to the connected university. When not aware of being watched however, some students

would talk in Japanese or stop talking altogether. In terms of promoting motivation to communicate in English outside of the classroom, *general* motivation, it is doubtful whether this grade-powered motivation will have any great effect.

Coordinators' feedback

Six out of the seven coordinators gave a positive reply to the question, "Did students' motivation to communicate in English improve this year? Why (not)?" The only neutral response was from a teacher who wrote, "I don't know. The students' motivation to communicate in OC classes seems to have been high from the beginning." Two of the coordinators believed that the reason for this increase was the fact that the students were being assessed in the class: "Being scored is such a good motivation for them to talk in English." Three respondents commented that the style of the OC classes, especially "game" type activities and role plays, helped to motivate the students.

One coordinator commented, "I can say that the student's motivation improved. I have found that they like games and role plays very much. They want to take part in them, so they use English naturally. In OC rooms, it is natural for them to get information in English and to speak English as much as they can. It's a big success beyond my expectations."

Almost all the coordinators' comments focus on the students' classroom motivation or their motivation to study harder in other English classes. The question of general motivation was only approached indirectly by one commentator who wrote that increase in motivation depended on whether the students had a goal for their English in the future. Students who were already motivated had their motivation increased by the course, whereas those who began with no motivation experienced no increase.

Student questionnaire

A questionnaire taken by students in the first class of the year and the last was the best measure of their general motivation.

The questionnaire results (see Table 5) show a decrease in the number of students strongly motivated to communicate in English. This is despite the teachers' and coordinators' feedback suggesting that students' classroom motivation increased over the year. There are a number of possible explanations for this.

One possible explanation, suggested by a coordinator, was that when students first enter high school they are generally much more enthusiastic than after they have been at school for a year. There is a general drop in enthusiasm for *everything* during the course of the first year at high school.

Table 5. Questionnaire results

I want to communicate in English.						
	NO!	No, not really	Maybe	A little	YES!	Number of students' responses
Before	6%	8%	22%	24%	40%	125
After	5%	7%	28%	27%	33%	117

Another coordinator suggested that because the average scores for the OC course (60%) were lower than average scores at junior high school (80%), many students lost motivation for communicating in English. This effect could have been exacerbated by the fact that OC grades in junior high school are generally based on participation or effort whereas the OC assessment system at Hosei II HS was based on ability. Some students, used to getting an OC score of 90% for their high energy during activities in junior high were suddenly receiving scores of 50% when they entered high school because they could not put two words together! Unfortunately, the mean score for the OC course, set by the English Department, meant that nothing could be done to rectify this situation. In order to overcome this demotivation, further study into the different attitudes held by junior and senior high schools concerning assessment of communicative ability might be useful and a move towards a consistent system may be necessary.

Conclusion

Our task-based Oral Communication course, with its simple three-stage methodology, has proven to be somewhat of a success in achieving its given objectives.

The first objective, to improve the students' ability to communicate in English, seems to have been the most successfully accomplished. Evidence from recordings, ongoing assessment, coordinators and the students themselves, suggests an improvement in not only fluency and communication but also complexity and accuracy. It would seem that the task based syllabus with its minimal focus on form through assessment and authentic listening has been effective in facilitating the acquisition of all these elements of communication ability despite the limited time available.

The second objective, to improve the students' general motivation to communicate in English, was not achieved. Students were less motivated to communicate in English at the end of the first year of the course than at the beginning, despite a perceived improvement in motivation to engage in tasks in the classroom. It is wondered whether it is possible for an OC course to overcome the negative effects of increasing student apathy during teenage years, the disappointment over the drop in mean grades between junior and senior and high school and the lack of any goal for the students' English study outside of the need to pass tests.

In the eyes of the English Department at Hosei II HS, the course was successful enough to run again in 2007 as a compulsory course for both first and second year students. For 2008, Ug! III, an optional OC course for third year students, has been proposed and awaits approval by the students. The school has also given us permission to distribute the course materials via the Internet and through conferences and workshops.

Though still in its early stages of development we feel very positive about the Ug! Course and are continuing to develop the material and make it available for others to use. If you are interested in using the material, finding out more about it or the theory behind it, then please visit the Hosei OC website at <web.mac.com/andygibbs1/iWeb/Hosei%20Life/Welcome.html>.

Jake Arnold is currently working at Hosei Dai II HS. He enjoys spending time with his family and practicing Kyudo.

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