

DESIGNING A LANGUAGE COURSE IN ENGLISH IN A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF) SETTING: PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE

Ratchaporn Rattanaphumma*

Abstract

This paper describes the practical aspects of a general education English language course designed for undergraduate students at Assumption University, Thailand. It begins with a description of the contextual factors that led to decision making about all components of the course such as conceptual underpinnings, objectives, syllabus design, activity types, learners' roles, teachers' roles, and assessment. The paper also reflects on the understanding and direct experiences that the author has faced during the course implementation under the Thai Qualification Frameworks (TQF) for Thailand's Higher Education System. It is hoped that the author can share with the teaching community her learning and teaching perspectives, her own context, and some practical aspects of teaching.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้บรรยายมุมมองการปฏิบัติการสร้างรายวิชาพื้นฐานทั่วไปวิชาภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับนักศึกษาในระดับปริญญาตรี มหาวิทยาลัยอัสสัมชัญ ประเทศไทย โดยเริ่มจากการบรรยายปัจจัยทางบริบทที่นำไปสู่การตัดสินใจเกี่ยวกับองค์ประกอบทั้งหมดของรายวิชา เช่น กรอบแนวคิดพื้นฐาน วัตถุประสงค์ แผนการสอน กิจกรรมต่าง ๆ บทบาทผู้เรียน บทบาทผู้สอน และการวัดผล บทความนี้ยังได้สะท้อนถึงความเข้าใจและประสบการณ์ตรงที่ผู้เขียนได้พบระหว่างการนำรายวิชาหรือหลักสูตรนี้ไปใช้ภายใต้กรอบมาตรฐานคุณวุฒิระดับอุดมศึกษาแห่งชาติ ผู้เขียนหวังว่าคงได้มีส่วนแบ่งปันกับเพื่อนครูเรื่องทัศนคติในการเรียนการสอน บริบทของการสร้างรายวิชาและมุมมองการปฏิบัติ

INTRODUCTION

Under the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF) for Thailand's Higher Education Sys-

tem endorsed by the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) of Thailand, the Department of General Education of Assumption University began working to modify

*Dr. Ratchaporn Rattanaphumma receives her BA in English (Second Class Honors) from Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and her MA in International Relations from Northeastern Illinois University. She obtains her Ph.D. in English as an International Language (EIL) from Chulalongkorn University. She is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at Assumption University of Thailand.

the general education curriculum to ensure the OHEC's goals and standards were met. My concern was to design the required language course, which has been one of the four main areas of the general education curriculum: Language, Humanities, Social Science, and Mathematics and Science. The course "Language and Communication Skills" has been implemented since the academic year 1/2011. In this paper, the design, the process of implementation and assessment are discussed. Finally, my final thoughts are also articulated for further development of this area of study.

CONTEXT

As mentioned by Graves (2000), designing a language course has several components. What makes sense depends on your beliefs and understandings, the reality of the context and what you know about your students. Therefore, I will start with some important factors to consider in defining context.

Contextual Factors

According to the survey on the enrollment of foreign students in Thai higher education institutions (2008), it was shown that there are 16,361 foreign students enrolling in 96 Thai higher educational institutions and Assumption University was ranked in the first top five universities, where the highest number of foreign students has reached 2,558. However, the data presented to the External Assessment Committee for the 3rd cycle of EQA assessment by ONESQA (2011) have shown that the number of non-Thai students of Assumption University have slightly grown to 3,143 (16.42%) in the year 2010. Most

importantly, this number consists of 87 nationalities.

There are two challenges for the general education language course design. One is the class size where the capacity can only fit up to the maximum of 60 students. The other is that the course is offered as a core requirement for most of undergraduate programs. Therefore, it is inevitable that the levels of students' language proficiency found along a continuum. However, it seems quite interesting that the course is designed and offered for international students. The term "international student" has been defined as enrolled students who can be both Thai and non-Thai students. Thai international students are defined as those who graduated from high school abroad or from international schools in Thailand. As I mentioned earlier, this is interesting and challenging due to the fact that some international students in this context, based on Kachru's three-circle model, include countries where the English language has as its origins, e.g. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA, the countries where English has a long history, essentially due to colonization, e.g. India, Nigeria, Singapore, the Philippines, and others, and the countries where English is used primarily for international purposes, e.g. the People's Republic of China, China, Japan, and Korea (Kachru, 1985, cited in Kachru, Y., Nelson, C.L., 2006).

Conceptual Underpinnings

The course design has been driven by four main conceptual underpinnings. They are as follows:

1. The course must embody the goals of the General Education Curriculum;

2. The course must embody the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF) for Thailand's Higher Education System;

3. The course must embody the vision of Assumption University;

4. The course must be based on the premise that the role of English is as a lingua franca (ELF).

Sinlarat (2006) elaborates on the development of the goals and philosophy of the General Education curriculum in the United States of America since the programs were launched at the beginning of the twentieth century (1910-1944). It has been stated that the University of Chicago, the University of Kansas, and Harvard University, launched their general education curriculum in 1920, 1936, and 1945 respectively.

In Thailand, the efforts to adopt general education courses initially took place in 1962 at Thammasart University – courses were offered for all university programs. It is evident that the development of goals has been based on the philosophy of the general curriculum, which initiated an emphasis on breadth and on harmony of life. Sinlarat (2006) contends that general education courses should prepare students to achieve in 4 main learning domains – knowledge in breadth, knowledge of self and the human dimension, moral application, and communication skills.

Since the course has been one of the required language courses for all programs, it should embody the goals of the general education curriculum. The core elements of the course should focus on communication skills – to prepare students to be competent in communicating and reflecting their ideas effectively.

In addition to the goals of the general education curriculum, the course has been guided

by the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF) for Thailand's Higher Education System. Based on its implementation handbook (2006), domains of learning play a significant role in this course design. It has been stated that courses developed within this framework should respond to multiple domains of learning. However, the emphasis on any particular learning outcomes depends on the nature and the core knowledge of that course. The domains are listed below:

1. Ethical and moral development
2. Knowledge
3. Cognitive skills
4. Interpersonal skills and responsibility
5. Analytical and communication skills

Although Office of the Higher Education Commission has included domains of learning in its requirements, the need for considering the University's strategic plan is also necessary. According to Assumption University's strategic plan (2008-2022), the university envisions its graduates as healthy and open-minded, professionally competent, and communicatively competent people. To elaborate on communicative competence, it is stated that students should be able to communicate effectively with people from other nations and to participate in globalization. Likewise, the course also embodies one of the hallmarks of the university's uniqueness, namely international community. Therefore, the set of course components should prepare students for life in the 21st century as global citizens and citizens of the ASEAN community (Saenghiran, 2011). Learning outcomes should encompass integrative outcomes such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, and technological skills. Similarly, assessment and evaluation should not advocate one and only one variety of English (Hamied, 2011).

Finally, the last principle guiding the design of the course was that the role of English is as a lingua franca (ELF). This emphasizes the role of English in communication between speakers from different first languages (L1s) (Jenkins, 2000). In Thailand, English is primarily used as a lingua franca between non-native speakers of English rather than as a means by which native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English communicate (Todd, 2006). It is appropriate to state that the shift from the role of English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as a lingua franca (ELF) has led to the paradigm shift in teaching and learning. As recommended by Seidlhofer (2004, cited in Sharma, 2008), attention should be given to the variety of Englishes used by speakers of English as a lingua franca communicating with one another. Aspiring for a native speaker model is neither desired nor relevant to the large mass of speakers that use English for lingua franca purposes.

It is evident to see that the current practical use and need of English should be reflected in all components of teaching and learning English such as textbooks, teaching materials, lesson plan, teaching methodology, and course design. Like most practitioners, I would contend that the course should be premised on the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF). Contextual factors and the prevailing authenticity should entail key concepts in ELF.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

“The course must embody the vision of Assumption University”. is the third conceptual underpinning reflected in the goals and objectives of the course. One of the visions

of Assumption University stated in 2000 is to envision students to be able to communicate effectively with people from other nations and to participate in globalization. The link between this vision and application can be seen from the emphasis on the learning outcomes in cognitive skills and interpersonal skills and responsibility.

There are three main objectives stated in the course syllabus given to students.

1. understand the theoretical concepts about a language system;
2. improve communication skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing;
3. apply language knowledge in real-life settings.

The above objectives show the overall learning outcomes; however, more specific objectives based on the domains of learning outcomes as stated by the TQF can be divided into the following categories.

Domain 1: Ethical and moral development

Since this domain has not been the main focus, the objective is counted as a secondary concern.

- to develop courteous manners towards teachers and classmates

Domain 2: Knowledge

- to gain a fundamental understanding about language systems
- to gain knowledge of communication skills through a variety of text types

Domain 3: Cognitive skills

- to develop communication skills in real-life situations

Domain 4: Interpersonal skills and responsibility

- to take responsibility for one's own and others' assignments
- to develop intercultural communication

tion skills

Domain 5: Analytical and communication skills

- to acquire knowledge from appropriate references or sources
- to use information technology systems to enhance communication skills

It should be noted that these learning outcomes are integrated through each unifying lesson plan.

SYLLABUS DESIGN

One of the four conceptual underpinnings: the course must embody *the goals of the General Education Curriculum*, has been reflected in the syllabus design, where a wide range of course contents and materials are presented. Students are encouraged to learn and understand a variety of language system and communication skill topics. Each class meets twice per week and consists of one and a half hours per session for the 16-week semester with two of these sessions used for the mid-term and final examinations. As mentioned above, the course has been divided into two main areas: fundamental knowledge about a language system and communication skills. The primary aim is to enable students to achieve both linguistic competence and linguistic performance; therefore, the design of the course syllabus derives from both content-based and task-based models. During the first half of the course, six chapters of fundamental knowledge of language systems are covered whereas another 3 chapters of communication skills are included in the second half of the course. The course contents are listed below:

Fundamental knowledge about language

systems

1. Fundamental facts about language
2. Morphology
3. Syntax
4. Semantics
5. Phonetics
6. Sociolinguistics

Communication skills

1. Presentation skills
2. Conducting an interview
3. Conducting a conference

Since the first implementation, I have been involved in material development. Graves (2000) states that for a teacher designing a course, materials development means creating, choosing or adapting, and organizing materials and activities so that students can achieve the objectives that will help them reach the goals of the course. Materials development encompasses decisions about the actual materials you use – textbooks, texts, pictures, worksheets, videos, and so on, as well as the activities students do, and how the materials and activities are organized into lessons. Graves also contends that no textbook was written for any special group of students, and so it will always need to be adapted in some way. Finally, I conceptualized the course contents in terms of domains of learning outcomes and wrote the course teaching materials which consist of 9 chapters.

As previously stated, the first part focuses on the fundamental knowledge about the language systems, in which students are expected to gain linguistic competence. Teaching methods mainly include a lecture, brainstorming, and discussion. The task-based portion of the syllabus is focused on in the second half of the course. To design the tasks, it is neces-

sary to refer to Bachman's language tasks discussion (1996). Bachman states that language use tasks are activities that involve individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation. Moreover, target language use tasks should consist of so-called "real-life" domains, in which language is used essentially for purposes of communication. It is believed that the use of real-life tasks can enhance students' ability to gain communicative competence. The communicative tasks, therefore, come into three communicative real-life tasks – presentations, interviews, and conferences. It is assumed that the knowledge of language systems can help broaden students' perspectives when they are preparing the tasks.

ACTIVITY TYPES

During the first part of the course, lectures and discussion are the main teaching methodologies employed. Students are given a discussion task before each lecture begins. After the lecture, students are asked to finish writing tasks which include short answer, fill-in the blank, problem-based activities, or reflections. These activity types are used to enhance students' communicative competence by stressing task practices that encourage students to perform to the best of their language ability. For example, the individual presentation task is facilitated by pair work. Students are assigned to work in pairs and each individual receives constructive feedback about his/her presentation performance from the pair. This helps students feel more relaxed. Another example from the interview task shows that students are encouraged to use real-world language in the interview task set-

ting. Students can also choose the roles of either interviewer or interviewee. Then they are given three forms of the interview task - pre-task, on-task, and post-task which help them follow their interview plan. It can be said that the tasks focus on authenticity since students can demonstrate their language performance through achieving the task. During the task, they are required to record a 15- minute interview session to be submitted for assessment and evaluation.

The last activity assigned to students is a conference task. After they are guided or given a lecture on "How to conduct a conference", they collaboratively work in a group. They are asked to follow the procedural steps of a conference plan and submit the blueprint of that plan to the teacher. The blueprint shows the topic and objectives of the conference, students' roles, and expected outcomes. They are allowed to have 2 weeks of practice before the real task is conducted in the classroom.

LEARNERS' ROLES

Students are expected to actively participate in all sessions. Even though the first half of the course mainly involves content-based instruction, they are required to complete the unit revision and ask any questions about material that is unclear to them. Some passive learners may be reluctant to ask or to participate in class; therefore, the teacher may help facilitate their involvement by having more personal interactions with them. The frequent use of group work and pair work requires students from diverse background (Burmese, American, Thai, Bhutanese, Nepali, Chinese, Cambodian, Korean, Malaysia, etc.) to work

together, to brainstorm discussion tasks, and to help by providing peer evaluation.

In completing three communicative task assignments (presentation, interview, and conference), students also take their own responsibility to work outside the classroom. This is a good opportunity for them to develop their interpersonal and intercultural skills. In addition, students are given two self-assessment forms to measure knowledge gained and communication skills before and after course implementation.

The various roles of the students develop the students into more autonomous learners. Once they work in a group or with their peers, they should be more responsible for the process and products resulting from the assignments. They learn how to work with others, to plan the assignment, and equally importantly, to accomplish all assignments on time.

TEACHER'S ROLES

The roles that a teacher plays include a traditional language teacher, a material developer, an organizer, and an assessor.

The traditional language teacher role: According to the Assumption University class attendance policy, students are required to have a minimum of 80% attendance. Therefore, checking attendance is one of the teacher's responsibilities. The teacher has to adopt some of the traditional high school teachers' roles because it is stated in one of the five learning outcome domains that "students should develop courteous manners towards teachers and classmates". Since the majority of students are first-year students, it is necessary to maintain class discipline.

The material developer role: As stated ear-

lier, the materials used in the course are designed by the teacher. The teacher develops the course book, video clips, Power Point slides, class activities, and task assignments using Grave's designing activity consideration (2000). For example, activities should focus on students' outside of class needs, activities should help students develop specific language and skills they need for authentic communication, activities should integrate the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, activities should vary the roles and groupings, and activities should be as authentic as possible.

The organizer role: When tasks are assigned, the teacher has to help students organize into pair or groups to work according to their preferences, nationalities, strengths, weaknesses, and personalities.

The assessor role: Even though students receive peer feedback during their performance, the teacher is the overall assessor of the students' performance.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment of students' learning outcomes is both formative and summative. The justification for both types is to assess both the process and product of learning outcomes. Formative assessment is measured by the ongoing work on task assignments (presentation, interview, and conference) in which feedback is given by both peers and the teacher. Summative assessment is measured by the mid-term and final examinations. As mentioned earlier, the course focuses on the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and success in language learning is measured against the ability to use that language in a

real context. Learners need to be able to use the language in a lingua franca context more than they need to be able to replicate the linguistic features of some imported exonormative standard of English (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Instead, the second language speaker should be measured against the bilingual or multilingual speaker (House, 2003, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010, p.177). Considering the above notions stated by Kirkpatrick and House, the task specifications of the course have been reflected in the focus on communicative functions. Students are evaluated in terms of their functional effectiveness and not their degree of approximation to NS norms (Seidlhofer, 2011). For instance, if we look carefully at the delivery criteria, all imply the reality of an international means of communication, which is “intelligibility”, not the “native speaker norms”. In addition, the specifications don’t focus on correct grammar but students’ grammar should not impede the listeners’ understanding. In terms of pronunciation, it is deemed appropriate to avoid “native-like” proficiency in English and to welcome varieties of English.

Presentation task specifications:

1. A 10-minute presentation
2. Choose a topic based on your preferences/interests. When you are making choices, please consider the following guidelines:
 - Your classmates and you should be interested in the topic.
 - What are the goals of the presentation?
 - How much information do you want your classmates to know about the topic
3. The final score (15 marks) is to be evaluated based on the following checklist.

Content:

1. The purpose or objective of the presentation was accomplished.
2. The information was lively and got attention.
3. The main idea or point was clearly stated toward the beginning.
4. The supporting points were clearly expressed.
5. The conclusion restated the main idea or purpose.

Delivery

1. The speaker used gestures and body language well.
2. The speaker maintained eye-contact with the audience.
3. The speaker did not read a script verbatim.
4. The speaker’s volume of speech was appropriate.
5. The speaker’s rate of speech was appropriate.
6. The speaker’s pronunciation was clear and comprehensible.
7. The speaker’s grammar did not prevent understanding.
8. The speaker used visual aids, hand-outs, etc. effectively.
9. The speaker showed enthusiasm and interest.
10. The speaker responded to audience questions well.

(Adapted from Brown, H.D., Abeywickrama, P. 2010)

It should be noted that both formative and summative assessments are involved the overall course evaluation. Below shows the relative weight given to formative and summative assessments.

Formative assessment

Individual assignment (presentation task)	15 marks
Pair-work assignment (interview task)	15 marks
Group work assignment (conference task)	10 marks
Active participation	10 marks

Summative assessment

Mid-term examination	25 marks
Final examination	25 marks

According to the TQF handbook, section 7 (2006), it is notable that both students' learning outcomes and course implementation must be evaluated. Therefore, a 10-item self-assessment form (see appendix B) is given to students before and after course implementation. They are used to compare students' perceived content knowledge and students' perceived language skill development before and after course implementation. Data are analyzed and reported in the course report form (TQF5).

FINAL THOUGHTS

As Graves (2000, P.7) states "Designing a language course is a work in progress because it involves human beings, teaching-and the planning and thinking which are a part of it - is not an enterprise that can be easily quantified, codified, and replicated. Rather, teaching is an organic, unpredictable, challenging, satisfying, and frustrating process". It can be said that this design is a preliminary study since it needs to be reshaped repeatedly throughout the cycle of course development. However, one great limitation that all general edu-

cation courses and teachers encounter is a large classroom size where the maximum of 60 students can sit. This may cause insufficient time for the teacher to monitor and organize the class effectively.

Although the class size may cause more difficulty in teaching, it is challenging for the teacher to interact with international students who have diverse backgrounds in second language learning such as American, Indian, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Bhutanese, Nepali, Burmese, Cambodian, Laos, Taiwanese, and Thai students. It is challenging in such a way that the teacher should be more reflective in the reality of the context and the paradigm shift in language teaching and learning. More attention should be paid on students' diverse backgrounds in second language learning and it is more challenging when the teacher needs to fully understand what counts the effectiveness of students' learning outcomes. The consideration should be drawn on students' communicative potential. As Seidlhofer (2011) suggests how an understanding of English as a lingua franca (ELF) could lead to a change in our thinking about English and the way it is generally taught.

Finally, it is undeniable to state that the role of English in this context has been used as lingua franca (ELF). If our vision is to prepare students to be engaged in the ASEAN community and to become a global citizen, this means that ASEAN speakers will be interacting with other people from the region. With this concept in mind, I want to conclude this paper with Kirlpatrick's (2010, p.177) statement – Rather than focusing on a specific variety of English, The ASEAN school curriculum needs to make a radical move to teach English as it is used in social contexts within the region. This I have called the "mul-

tilingual model”, combined with the adoption of a lingua franca approach to the teaching of English.

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