



AN EAP SYLLUBUS DESIGN IN THE CONTEXT OF CAI

TANG TANG

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beijing Wuzi Univeristy,

E-mail: tangtang@bwu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

This is an EAP Syllabus Design in the context of CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction) in a specific area: School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beijing Wuzi University. EAP writing used to be considered cautious, serious, and uninteresting. In order to design an attractive and efficient syllabus for EAP course in the chosen context, CAI auxiliary teaching method, which has been recommended and encouraged by many scholars in many works, is projected by the author in this essay. Different from traditional teaching pattern only with blackboard, chalks or handouts, CAI can provide language classroom with resourceful materials, various forms and unique presentation. It will bring a new and fresh look to the design of EAP syllabus which is under consideration.

Keywords: *EAP, Syllabus Design, CAI,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hamp-Lyons (2001: 130) points out that “EAP (English for Academic Purpose) is a thriving and important aspect of TESOL that has so far received less attention from researchers than it deserves”. In China, English is a compulsory course in universities. As English becomes an international language, required by the government’s policy, Chinese students have to learn it and get credits to achieve their graduation certificates in most of the universities. Generally speaking, the focus of ESL teaching in Chinese universities is to teach students “conversational and social genres of the language” (Hamp-Lyons, 2001: 127), which includes some basic grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures rather than systematic and academic skills in English language.

In general, students in China, who are learning English, could be divided into two groups. The first group is the majority who are learning so-called “College English”. These students are majoring in other courses, like international business, physics, biology, etc. English, for them, is a tool to enhance their career prospects. Another group of students, who are the minority, are learning English as their major. Simply speaking, English is no longer a tool for them but a means of making a life. Under this circumstance, to develop formal and academic genres rather than conventional and social ones becomes necessary. The chosen specific area, due to the less attention

paid to academic writing (which could be inferred from its curriculum), may be very typical in Chinese college education for English. Therefore, designing an appropriate course in terms of critical and academic writing for the students in this area becomes significant and urgent.

When this point is made, some questions have to be asked now: How to organize or plan such a syllabus on this term? How to make it useful, feasible as well as attractive? In this situation, a term has to be mentioned: CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction). Many scholars in their works proved that the utilization of CAI in language teaching could be a very effective and efficient way. Like what Cai (2003: 4) illustrates, the continually updated Information Technology brings a new outlook for English teaching. Computer-based multimedia and network create a vivid and stereotype pattern for language teaching, in which language learner’s efficiency and teaching effects are greatly enhanced. Furthermore, according to Education Ministry of China, the utilization of computer technology in language classroom is strongly encouraged and recommended to replace the old teaching pattern.

Therefore, an EAP syllabus design in the context of CAI for the second-year students who are majoring in English at Beijing Wuzi University is on the way.



2. RESEARCH METHODS

In this part, two branches are going to be discussed in details respectively. And then, these two would be combined together to project the final syllabus of EAP.

2.1. Rationale for the Task-based syllabus approach

As Breen (2001: 151) suggests, “any syllabus is a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning”. A syllabus shows what will be taught by teachers and what will be learned by students “in terms of content selected to be appropriate to overall aims”. In addition, Breen (2001: 152-155) describes four types of ELT syllabus approaches. They are “Formal Syllabus”, “Functional Syllabus”, “Task-based Syllabus” and “Process Syllabus”. In comparison, Harmer (2001: 295-230) introduces some other types of syllabus according to “the selection of items to be learned and the grading of those items into an appropriate sequence” as well as some criteria of syllabus design. Generally speaking, according to Harmer, there are seven types of syllabus. They are “Grammar Syllabus”, “Lexical Syllabus”, “Functional Syllabus”, “Situational Syllabus”, “Topic-based Syllabus”, “Task-based Syllabus” and “Multi-syllabus Syllabus”. Although Widdowson (1984, cited by Yalden 1987: 86) points out that “a syllabus of any kind is viewed as providing for control of the learning process”, considering my chosen context, I would like to design an EAP syllabus for the target students adopting one of the types from Harmer as well as from Breen: a “Task-based Syllabus”. And the rationale for choosing this approach in my case will be simply explained in the following part.

Why do I choose this type of approach? I think the reasons should stem from the characteristics of this approach and the learners’ needs in the chosen context. What I should do is to find whether these two parts could match each other or not?

First, let’s look at the characteristics of task-based syllabus from some experts’ views.

As Breen (2001: 155) states, a task-based syllabus is an approach with “selection and subdivision of special purpose tasks”. And his idea is echoed by Harmer as well. Harmer (2001:299) shares the view that “a task-based syllabus lists a series of task, and may later list some or all of the language to be used in those tasks”. The designers and teachers of such a syllabus are encouraged to provide “suitable tasks” in sequence to help students interact and negotiate in meaning, because

“a learner’s expression and interpretation of meaning during appropriate tasks would enable the acquisition and refinement of linguistic knowledge and its social use” (Breen, 2001: 153). When referring to “meaning”, Breen (2001) cited Krashen (1985) as his backing. Krashen (1985, cited by Breen, 2001: 153) summarizes that “language was best acquired through the learner’s focus upon meaning in the input provided to the learner”. Therefore, it may be inferred that there is clue existing in the task-based syllabus approach: special task – meaning – learners’ input.

Meanwhile, Breen (2001: 155) argues that the sequencing of such a syllabus is typical in “familiar to less familiar or generalisable to less generalisable tasks” and the problems are always “shaped in earlier tasks”. Like Prabhu (1987: 26) describes that a task-based syllabus is a “procedural syllabus”. Besides, Swales (1990: 75) points out that “tasks can be seen to have beginnings, middles and ends provides an orientation for learners against the often opaque background of a course or syllabus” because “they provide clear objectives for learners and establish ‘landmarks of achievement’” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 117, cited by Swales, 1990: 75). In other words, according to Swales (1990: 75), “the idea that tasks are ‘differentiated’ and ‘sequenceable’ is clearly valuable”.

Second, the learner’s needs in the specific context should be examined.

As Hamp-Lyons (2001: 127) introduces “needs analysis is fundamental to an EAP approach to course design and teaching”. In the specific context I chose, the learning target is to develop students’ skills and abilities in writing a successful undergraduate dissertation. What the learners need is how language is used in a particular setting. The language here may consist primarily of learners’ interpretation of meaning of some skill practice (e.g. how to write a good introduction; a conclusion; how to organize appropriate referencing etc.). Simply speaking, these elements or specific tasks make up the “language” mentioned here. Besides, Oshima & Hogue (1999: ix) state that academic writing could be carried out in “small and learnable steps” and “clear, relevant models illustrating each step could reinforce each lesson”. In fact, it could be inferred that the “step” mentioned here is another name for “task” as mentioned before. In addition, Oshima & Hogue (1999: ix) argue that this approach could be suitable for “advanced college or college-bound international and English as a Second Language students”. If there is a clue existing in learners’



needs, it may be: special purpose – task – meaning – learners’ interpretation or input.

Therefore, according to the brief analysis and explanation above, I might be able to say that a task-based syllabus design matches the learners’ needs and could be appropriate in the specific context I chose. However, some people else may argue that “a task-based syllabus fails to command sufficiently widespread support amongst teachers and methodologists” because “it is difficult to know how to grade tasks in terms of difficulty” (Harmer, 2001: 299). At the same time, Nunan (1988: 44) emphasizes that there is “little or no attempt to relate these processes to outcomes”. These words could not be ignored, but neither could they be taken for granted. An example may show something for us in such an argument.

This was a project for the Department of External Affairs of the Government of Canada. It was to “focus quite narrowly on the needs of Canadian government officials responsible for trade and commerce in embassies abroad” (Yalden, 1987: 121). Therefore, the syllabus design needed to consider the characteristics of language as communication. In other words, this project, like the EAP course in my context, is another special case with specific purposes for a specific group of people. The two linguists (Maryse Bosquet and Janice Yalden, cited from Yalden, 1987: 121) who were responsible for designing the syllabus chose a task-based approach. They focused “task” in “identifying learners’ needs; defining syllabus content, organizing language acquisition and measuring student achievement” (Yalden, 1987: 125). In addition, Yalden (1987: 125) argues that “task’ in this project means nothing obscure”. In other words, in order to design a specific syllabus in a specific context, clear and explicit tasks are needed. When recalling why she decided adopting a task-based syllabus in this project, Yalden (1987: 124) confesses that she found “the project has to be arranged in a linear fashion; the steps seem discrete, in fact, they are not”. Then she and her partner chose the task-based syllabus approach in their project according to the needs analysis.

Referring to the ignoring of “difficulty grade” in a task-based syllabus, Swales (1990: 75) points out that “the simplicity or complexity of a task is not easily predictable in advance”, thus it would not only be full of “surprises, both good and bad” but also could help teachers “discover appropriate sequences of tasks” in practice.

Therefore, it could be inferred, though a task-based syllabus approach has some constraints, it

still could be adopted in a specific context with specific purposes for specific learners.

2.2 The advantages of utilization of CAI in this project

Many scholars have introduced many advantages of CAI (based on multi-media facilities) used in language classroom. For example, Cai & Wu (2003: 2-7) and Zhang (2003: 57-60) list several good points of CAI utilization in College English teaching. According to them, there are seven points of CAI used in language classroom which cannot be ignored. Firstly, compared to tiredness and boredom brought by traditional language teaching methods, the characteristics of teaching with the help of multi-media are “having fun” with many vivid pictures and video clips which enable the students, involving more senses, absorb more information from straightforward input; Secondly, CAI can make up for the loss of time and space of traditional teaching methods. It can create a real language context to make students to feel the miracle of language and hence stimulate their learning interests, desire and imagination; Thirdly, CAI teaching involves more information input patterns, like written words, figures, images, videos. It is more resourceful and richer in content, which makes students are more willing to participate in teaching and learning process; Fourthly, through multi-media technology, like PPT, teachers can show some materials, such as cultural background information, key words and language points, homework ... on the screen. In this way, students can save more time to take notes and think more carefully, and then they could organize more activities, create more chances to discuss, communicate, perform, debate, ask and answer orally, therefore, the classroom atmosphere can be livened up greatly; Fifthly, teachers can show more complimentary exercises on the screen instead of photocopy in advance. Besides, through computer software, like Excel, teachers can calculate and analyze the students’ learning data more efficiently, and hence in this way to give more guidance and encouragement to students; Sixthly, CAI auxiliary teaching can give more room to students to establish their own learning agenda, and therefore, individualizes the teaching and learning process; Seventhly, vivid pictures, images, figures provided by CAI can promote and stimulate students’ activeness and enthusiasm in leaning and intoxicate them in the rightful aesthetic judgment. Eighthly, according to Dharinya & Jayanthi, we also can develop a

learning process “based on the user preference and learning style with domain ontology, the effective personalization can be attained” (2012: 98). Thus, it could be a very interesting way for learners to learn specific tasks in their own ways. Finally, CAI techniques could make the learning intersecting as well as vividly through image creation. And “the image can be compressed for storage and retrieval, as well as transmitted via a computer network or a communication system” (Elamaran & Raikumar, 2012: 201).

Therefore, it could be safely concluded that CAI auxiliary teaching pattern can be feasible in language teaching. It could be a fresh air in the new era of language classroom through combining the traditional ways and high-tech ways, through colliding teachers’ personal charm, experiences, vibrancy and multi-media’s fun, flexibility, and convenience. And in this case, our task is to figure out a feasible and attractive way to design a syllabus focused on EAP writing, which used to be considered to be boring, tedious and complicated, with the help of CAI method.

3. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1 A summary of the syllabus

Context summary

- EAP at the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Beijing Wuzi University
- Second-year Chinese students, majoring in English, sharing a similar education background with at least 7-8 years English learning in China.
- Students will be confronted with some problems and required skills for writing a successful dissertation in one year.
- An optional course for one term (18 weeks, one 90 minutes class per week), about 27 hours.
- The maximum size of a class is up to 25 students.
- The course is set for the first term of academic year 2011-2012. (From Sep.3rd, 2011 to Jan.18th, 2012)

Aims

Students must be able to handle academic English at the undergraduate level and independently develop a successful final dissertation which requires 3500-4500 words according to the policy.

Students must be sufficiently competent in the English language for the purposes of writing a logical and coherent dissertation with correct referencing, appropriate structure and suitable methodology.

Students should develop the skills and awareness necessary for academic writing in their final undergraduate dissertation.

Organization of content

Students in groups would receive a topic focused on a specific task in every class through e-mails before class. And they are required to collect sufficient materials on Internet and websites. Then their pre-class work would be showed in a presentation by PPT in class.

The tasks of teachers are to explain, illustrate, conclude and feed back, especially encourage students to analyze and think independently. During this period, teachers can provide more materials and guidance in the forms of pictures, videos, music and e-mails. Finally, every subtle and little improvements, errors, and feedback of every student could be recorded in an Excel form and through which, data can be collected, analyzed and feedback can be drawn quickly.

Task sequence would be “shaped by problems in earlier tasks” (Breen, 2001: 155).

Teaching Facilities:

Materials in terms of academic writing; chalk and blackboard; computer (software used like Microsoft Powerpoint, Word, Excel etc.); screen; projector; Internet; an enrollment of a public mailbox for the whole class

Guidelines for evaluation and assessment

During the course, students are required to write 4 pieces of writing individually as homework according to the different tasks discussed in class (each would be expected to be 500-800 words). This part would constitute 70% of the final mark. (Note: according to the Chinese hundred-mark system, “60” is the *pass* score.)

At the end of the term, a mini-project (about 1500-2000 words) is required on any topic chosen by students themselves. This part would constitute 30% of the final mark.

All the writings are required written in electronic Word files and submitted through e-mails. Teachers can make the comments and feedback through Microsoft Word Correction software. Meanwhile, the results would be received by students individually through e-mails in a very short time.

Students’ grades would be recorded, calculated and informed in an Excel form.

Brief criteria for the assessment

Aims are clearly stated and feasible.



Referencing is appropriate according to academic conventions.

Content is logical and coherent.

There is enough evidence to support the idea.

Work is carefully carried out with correct grammar, spelling and style. (with Microsoft Word correction system, it can be realized easily.)

A word count should be included. (it is also provided by Microsoft Word.)

In order to illustrate the design project more detailed and understandable, the following is an outline of the syllabus for the first three weeks.

Week 1: 05/09/2011

The writing process: Task 1: Prewriting

Helping students learn how to choose an appropriate topic and narrow it down

For example, showing a diagram on the screen to illustrate the process of narrowing a general topic to a specific one:

General topic: **ENVIRONMENT
POLLUTION
OCEAN POLLUTION**

Specific topic: **OIL SPILLS**

Very Specific Topic: **EFFECTS ON SEA LIFE**

Encouraging students to generate ideas in the specific focus through presentation in PPT files

For example, making a list of every idea comes into students' mind about a topic focused on "effects of spilling oil on sea life"; using any words, phrases or sentences they provide; then rewrite the list and group similar ideas together; crossing out items that don't belong or that are duplications

Encouraging them to discuss in pairs or groups to find out the reasons

Practice: After surfing on the Internet, giving them several subjects in a broad area (such as: school, sports, food, television, entertainment, etc.) and encourage them to narrow them down according to their own interpretations from different angles, and give them brief feedback

Homework task: draw up a list of five topics they would like to discuss in class. (It won't count to the final mark)

Week 2: 19/09/2011

The writing process: Task 2: Outlining

Introduction of the importance and the concept of an outlining in essay writing

Through examples helping students learn how to identify sub-lists and how to organize an outline

For example, providing a topic "Communication Problems" to students on the screen; giving them sub-lists as well as some ideas which are related to the sub-lists but at random; encouraging them to find out the sub-lists and category the ideas

The following form can be perfected one by one on the computer as students are encouraged to have a brainstorm. Students can tell how this form is established one item after another on the screen, and then they can learn and feel the establishment of outline vividly.

Communication Problems

poor verbal skills	use incomplete sentences
lack vocabulary	unclear expressions
Americans difficult to understand	
poor pronunciation	
use slang and idioms	Americans talk too fast

Selecting and presenting several pieces of students' work on the screen and encouraging them to discuss them in pairs or groups; students are allowed to ask questions and give their feedback freely after the discussion

Presenting the good example to students and make comments

Communication Problems

A. poor verbal skills
 --- lack vocabulary
 --- poor pronunciation
B. Americans difficult to understand
 --- use incomplete sentences
 --- use unclear expressions
 --- talk too fast
 --- use slang and idioms

Week 3: 26/09/2011

The writing process: Task 3: Paragraph Structure

Introduction of the function of a paragraph
 The three parts of a paragraph: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentences

Presenting good and poor examples

For example, showing three paragraphs which are about 200 words on the same topic *Gold* in advance in the class mail-box on Internet and encouraging students, through discussion in pairs or groups, to select the best one they think and find out the three functional sentences in it through e-mails

Presentation: Student speakers from groups or pairs give PPT presentation on the reasons of their choice and their own interpretation on the three functional sentences



Teachers' detailed analysis and oral feedback on the students' presentation

Homework task: writing a draft of a paragraph according to the outline developed in the last class; making sure the three parts would be included. (500-800 words and it will count to the final mark)

(Note: the framework of the syllabus above is adapted from Blyth (1996: 101-107) and Marsh (1992); the examples in week1, 2 & 3 are adapted from Oshima & Hogue (1999: 3-18))

3.2 Evaluation of the syllabus

Here is a piece of oral comments from Ms. Yang, one of my colleagues from the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Beijing Wuzi University. I would reflect my syllabus design in the following two aspects:

3.2.1 the organization of the content

As Ms. Yang mentioned, in this part, "the teacher's role is not quite clear". Readers would know the teacher would encourage students to think, compare and organize good and poor samples independently, but it is obscure what exact methodology would be adopted and what activities would be carried out. Besides, when referring to a "good sequence" of tasks, the designer did not give readers a definition of "good sequence" of tasks and the idea of how to organize a "good sequence" of tasks.

On this point, I agree with Ms. Yang. Even though multi-media and Internet are mentioned in the design, some exact and detailed steps are still overlooked. Having observed the methods used by Blyth (1996) in her article *Designing an EAP Course for Postgraduate Students in Ecuador*, I found she used a range of specific and attractive teaching media in her class, like movies, newspaper articles, literature, music and art (cartoons) that focus on the American way of life as her goal of the course is to develop students' skills and awareness to function as autonomous learners in the American University context as well as to help learners acquire good marks in the TOEFL test. Therefore, combining Ms. Yang's evaluation and comment with the vivid and attractive methods introduced by Blyth, I might be able to develop a more valid and explicit plan on content organization.

For example, in order to develop the learners' awareness of English writing style, I may tape-play a song named *Another Day in Paradise* by

Phil Collins; encourage students to predict and infer from the title: What and who would be involved? What is the relationship between "he" and "she" in the song?; group them on paraphrasing and filling in the missing words (preposition); let them pair up and explain what they could acquire in the song; then play the song again for check (Through this practice, I could encourage students to think and reflect on expressing methods, choice of words as well as enhance their sensitivity and interest in English language)

(Note: some of the methods are adapted from Blyth (1996: 111))

3.2.2 the assessment

Ms. Yang straightforwardly pointed out that she was confused by the assessment part in my syllabus. She asked me two questions concerning her confusion: 1) what made you define the mini-project as constituting 30% of the final mark whereas the former four pieces of homework constitute 70% of the final mark? What is your rationale? 2) how would you choose tasks for the four pieces of homework? Is it necessary to grade their importance or difficulty?

Obviously, they are quite sharp questions for me, as this is my first time to design a syllabus on my own. I think, in this situation, I have to go back to some reference about assessment. Then I might find some evidence to help me reconsider the assessment part in my specific context.

According to Brindley (2001: 138), the purpose of an assessment is "to collect information on learners' language proficiency and/or achievement that can be used by the stakeholders in language learning programs for various purposes". And it is acknowledged that many experts agree with the idea that assessment should be "valid" as well as "reliable" (e.g. Brindley (2001), Harmer (2001)).

When talking about the relationship between assessment and syllabus or curriculum, I may be reminded that "trends in assessment practices interact with trends in curriculum change" (OECD, 1998: 80). And this could be echoed by so-called "washback" known by many experts and teachers. As trends are changing, many traditional and conventional methods used in assessment may be changing too. There is an example provided by Oshima & Hogue (1999: 258) in assessing learners' writing skills. In this example, Oshima & Hogue (1999) introduce a new, innovative and interesting method. They call it "Writing under Pressure". It gives learners practice in thinking and



writing quickly, as they will have to do during essay examinations. The goal is to complete each paragraph within twenty minutes. This time period is regarded as the average time for answering a typical essay question. And the procedure of this approach is 1) Brainstorm for ideas by listing, clustering or freewriting; 2) Make a simple outline; 3) Write a rough draft; 4) Check over your paragraph twice, once for content and organization and once for grammar and mechanics; 5) Make any necessary corrections before you hand it in. Besides, they provide some available topics, such as “A goal in your life”, “Compare two family members or two friends”, etc. In this way, young learners may feel refreshed and enthusiastic about a writing practice, because I presume many of them are quite tired of the traditional and rigid assessment according to my 5 years’ ESL teaching experience.

Therefore, according to my interpretation of the reference above, I would revise my assessment in terms of reliability and validity as well as attractiveness. And the most important thing is to organize an innovative and refreshing assessing method for the learners who could be already bored with the old and traditional assessing system.

For example, in the context I chose, students have been very familiar with computer operation in their spare time, but they seldom have chances to perform such ability in class. Therefore, I am considering combining these two elements together (their computer talent and their writing skills acquired in this course). I may organize a students’ presentation assisted by computer as a part of the assessment. Focusing on one topic, like “Communication Problems” mentioned in week 2, students in groups are encouraged to do anything they want with computer to show how they would develop such a topic in terms of academic writing; they are encouraged to use vivid pictures, cartoons, music, etc. to make their presentation attractive; teachers would not be the sole scorer; the rest of the students would be the judges as well.

(Note: OECD is the abbreviation of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development)

4. CONCLUSION

In this project, a syllabus of EAP in the chosen context is designed with the aid of CAI technology. As what has been shown, CAI tech brings great benefits for language classroom. It is like a fresh air making a used-to-be boring, tedious and serious course more vivid, interesting and attractive. Besides, with its help, teachers could do

their job more efficiently, hereby save more time to communicate with their students and students can present more ideas and thoughts in language class. Although we cannot deny that CAI teaching may also brings some disadvantages to language classroom like the worries from some scholars, for example, “the overuse of the tech” (Li, 2004: 35), “too much information input” (Gao, 2011: 258), the advantages brought by CAI for language classroom are still obvious and never be overlooked.

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