

Developing an Effective Syllabus in Japanese EFL College Classes

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Nobuo TSUDA

Introduction

Nowadays many EFL college students in Japan are able to consult their school syllabus prior to registering for their classes. Because of this, the syllabus plays a significant role for students in finding out the general goals, materials, content and requirements of a class. Hadley (1993, p.485) states the importance of the syllabus in language programs as follows:

A well-designed course syllabus is a necessary component of a successful language program, from both the teacher's and the students' points of view. For teachers, the course syllabus provides direction and guidance in the scope, sequence, and pacing of classroom activities; for students, the syllabus provides at a glance the profile of the semester's work and the expectations for successful completion of that work. It is strongly recommended that teachers distribute course syllabi and any accompanying information sheets on the first day of class so that students will know what is expected of them.

Although most EFL college instructors in Japan submit their general syllabus to the school, they often fail to give out a more specific syllabus to their own students. As a result, many students are not clear about what they are going to study, what they need to achieve and what is expected of them in the course. Thus, students often say, "I don't know how I can get a good grade in the class." or "I'm not sure what I can get out of this class." Ur (1996, p.12) says that the elimination of a "pre-planned syllabus may result in significant gaps in the language content taught." Ur further states that the abandonment of syllabus may result in an unclear structure and it creates difficulties for both teachers and learners in seeing progress or learning outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is to show how we can develop an effective syllabus in Japanese EFL college classes so that students will be able to get a clear sense of the course and aim to achieve the objectives set by the individual teacher. By consulting a well-constructed syllabus, students feel more secure about what they are going to learn and what they need to focus on in each class. Richards (2001, p.152) states "A syllabus describes the major elements that will be used in planning a language course and provides the basis for its instructional focus and content." I believe that an effective syllabus will not only help teachers improve classroom instruction but also increase

students awareness of what they need to do in order to succeed in EFL college classes in Japan.

1. Components of a Good Syllabus

Smith and Razzouk (1993) indicate that an effective syllabus consists of the following ten points: 1. Basic information: instructor and course 2. Course purposes, goals, and objectives 3. Educational philosophies or beliefs 4. Content outline 5. Assignments and course calendar 6. Textbooks 7. Supplementary readings 8. Methods of instruction 9. Student feedback and grading procedures 10. Learning facilities and resources for students. Although this list does not necessarily apply to Japanese EFL college classes, it gives basic guidelines for what needs to be included in the syllabus.

2. Students' Profile and Needs Analysis

Smith and Razzouk's outline of an effective syllabus looks comprehensive; however, it ignores the basic process by which we develop an effective syllabus. Nunan (1988) points out that many ESL/EFL teachers tend to make most of the curriculum decisions prior to encountering students. In other words, they complete all the components of the syllabus, including classroom activities, without knowing who is actually taking the course. Nunan suggests that the first step in the process is getting information about learners in order to identify their objective needs. This initial information includes learners' current proficiency level, educational background, previous learning experiences and time in the target culture. Brown (1995) call this process needs analysis or needs assessment, and it serves as the foundation for meeting the needs of a specific group of students. Nunan says that once the course begins, learners' subjective needs, such as preferred methodology and learning-style preferences, can be obtained.

3. Analyzing Syllabuses and Developing a Syllabus Checklist

In order to develop an effective EFL syllabus in Japanese college classes, it is important and useful to analyze a wide range of syllabuses developed by ESL/EFL practitioners as well as regular college professors, because we will be able to find the commonalties, differences, strengths and weaknesses of existing syllabuses. In addition, analyzing different syllabuses will help us develop the essential components of a syllabus and formulate what needs to be included in our own syllabus.

In the beginning of this year, I went through different syllabuses of EFL/ESL and American college courses. There are several commonalities of content and style in the syllabuses I collected from different institutions. These include sections for the title of the course, course objectives, materials, learning activities, class schedule, assignments and requirements. Concerning the style of the syllabus, all the syllabuses began with the title of the course, and information on the instructor, followed by objectives or materials and the schedule.

There are some differences particularly between ESL/EFL and regular American college course syllabuses. First of all, some ESL/EFL syllabuses do not contain specific objectives. Pregent (1994) refers to specific objectives as what students will be able to do at the end of the course. Because some syllabuses lack this important element, students may not be able to understand the reasons for doing activities in the class. Moreover, students may find it difficult to set their own goals in the class.

Another significant difference is that most ESL/EFL syllabuses are simple and easy to understand for students who are studying English as a foreign or second language. However, too much simplicity may cause ambiguity because some essential information such as objectives, grading criteria, or rules, is missing. Some teachers may explain those details in the class, but verbal communication with non-native speakers of English can create some misunderstandings since students' first language is not English. Perhaps a written explanation or description in the syllabus is much easier to understand since they can go back any time to check their syllabus.

Unlike most ESL/EFL syllabuses, many regular college course syllabuses contain a bibliography section. This is very useful information for students when writing their papers or giving their presentations. Furthermore, the bibliography is beneficial to students who would like to pursue their studies.

One TESOL course syllabus lists a number of ways that students can get extra credit. This seems like the instructor is giving away good grades to every student; however, the instructor's basic principle states that "Good grades are not given by the teacher; they are earned by the student. (An "A" grade represents exceptionally good work. The grade for acceptable, average work is a "C.") Your responsibility as a student is to learn the material and complete the course requirements to the best of your ability. The teacher's responsibility is to help you accomplish these goals" (Henrichsen, 1999).

As I look at the list of extra credit assignments, such as engaging in (and reporting on) professional activities (e.g., attending a professional conference), giving a presentation at a professional conference, joining a TESOL-related professional association (show evidence of your membership), it seems that these activities will help students prepare themselves to become good TESOL professionals. The instructor gives stu-

dents many opportunities to engage in practical activities which are related to actual TESOL professions. It seems that by incorporating this extra credit in our own EFL syllabus, we might motivate our students to improve their target language.

After analyzing different syllabuses, I developed the following syllabus checklist, which becomes the basis for developing an effective syllabus. Some of the items may not apply to some particular courses; however, all the elements could possibly be included in the syllabus.

Syllabus Checklist

- a. Instructor's information
 1. _____ name, office location, office hours, e-mail, phone number
 2. _____ time & place where class will be held
- b. Information about the course
 1. _____ course title
 2. _____ goals, objectives
- c. Basic principles
 1. _____ rules (tardiness, absence, cheating, plagiarism, etc.)
 2. _____ what is expected of students (students' responsibilities)
- d. Textbooks & materials
 1. _____ bibliography of text(s)
 2. _____ information on other materials
- e. Course requirements
 1. _____ description of assignments including due dates
 2. _____ quizzes & exams
 3. _____ other requirements
- f. Grading scheme
 1. _____ list of assignments, quizzes, exams and percentage of final grade
 2. _____ extra credit
- g. Schedule
 1. _____ topics & learning activities
 2. _____ assignments, quizzes, exams
 3. _____ chapters, pages of text
- h. Additional information
 1. _____ useful materials for EFL (videos, Internet, texts, etc.)
 2. _____ bibliography related to the course

I shall now describe each component and point out some significant considerations for developing an effective syllabus.

4. Instructor's Information and Information about the Course

The instructor's information includes the instructor's name, office location, office hours, e-mail address and phone number. Since most part-time teachers in Japan do not have their own office, they cannot provide the location or office hours. Concerning e-mail addresses and phone numbers, many teachers in Japanese colleges are reluctant to provide their phone number and e-mail address because they are afraid of getting many phone calls or e-mails. Nevertheless, the e-mail address and phone number will be helpful if students come up with any questions or have any other reason to contact the teacher.

With regard to information about the course, such as goals and objectives, Graves (1996) says that setting goals and objectives gives teachers a sense of direction and a framework for planning a course. Clear goals and objectives help teachers decide appropriate content and activities for the course. They also give a framework for evaluating whether the course is effective and helping students achieve objectives. Both Brown (1995) and Graves (1996) define goals as general statements of what learners need to achieve in the course, in the long term. Objectives are more specific skills learners need to master in order to attain those goals. Graves states that goals refer to destination; the objectives play a role in charting different paths to the destination.

Pregent (1994) states that a goal is a statement made from the teacher's point of view beginning with a verb, such as: course XXX aims to: develop, help, make students, etc. For example, the following is the goal of an advanced TOEFL class I am teaching at Konan University: The goal of this course is to help students obtain TOEFL scores of 550 in paper and pencil (213 in CBT) or above.

Pregent (1994) states that an objective is a statement (one to three lines) beginning with a verb, but made from the student's point of view. For example, the course objectives of my Advanced TOEFL class are as follows:

By the end of the course, the students will be able to:

1. become familiar with the CBT TOEFL test.
2. finish the reading section within the time (in paper and pencil test).
3. develop various reading/listening/writing/structure skills.
4. read authentic materials without much difficulty.
5. increase vocabulary.
6. have a positive attitude toward studying English.

5. Basic Principles

Basic principles consist of rules concerning such things as tardiness, absence,

cheating, plagiarism and the student's responsibility. The purpose of this section is to help students understand what is expected of them concerning the class and class assignments. For example, in many Japanese EFL college classes, students often make excuses by saying that they did not know the information regarding an assignment because they were absent from the previous class. Therefore, a statement such as, "If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to get the assignment from a classmate or the teacher." will help students become more responsible for their own learning.

6. Textbooks and Materials

In this section, the information concerning textbooks and other materials tells students what materials are required for the class. Richards (2001) says that some teachers use mainly instructional materials, which provide the major component of lessons, and students practice various skills taught in the classroom. Other teachers merely use materials as supplements. For learners, materials are the main source of contact with the subject, aside from the teacher. Therefore, use of materials in language classrooms is an important aspect of language curriculum.

With regard to selecting materials, some teachers tend to use authentic materials whereas others use commercial textbooks. Consequently, choosing instructional materials is a very important decision for the teachers, because what students will learn will be determined by materials. Richards (2001) points out that 'authentic materials' refers to teaching resources such as texts, photographs, and videos that are not designed for teaching purposes. 'Created materials' refers to textbooks and other developed teaching resources. Richards (2001, pp.252-256) states that authentic materials and created materials such as commercial textbooks have both advantages and disadvantages, as follows:

Advantages of authentic materials:

1. They provide authentic cultural information about the target culture.
2. They provide exposure to real language.
3. They relate more closely to learners' needs.
4. They support a more creative approach to teaching.

Disadvantages of authentic materials:

1. Created materials can also be motivating for learners.
2. Authentic materials often contain difficult language.
3. Created materials may be superior to authentic materials because they are generally built around a graded syllabus and hence provide a systematic coverage of teaching items.
4. Using authentic materials is a burden for teachers:

Advantages of commercial textbooks:

1. They provide structure and a syllabus for a program.
2. They help standardize instruction.
3. They maintain quality.
4. They provide a variety of learning resources.
5. They are efficient.
6. They can provide effective language models and input.
7. They can train teachers.
8. They are visually appealing.

Disadvantages of commercial textbooks:

1. They may contain inauthentic language.
2. They may distort content.
3. They may not reflect students' needs.
4. They can deskill teachers.
5. They are expensive.

In many language classrooms, teachers often use both authentic and created materials since both of them have advantages and disadvantages. In addition, the distinction between authentic and created materials is becoming more difficult because many published textbooks use authentic sources (Richards 2001). Whether the materials are authentic or not, appropriate selection of teaching materials depends on students' language abilities, needs and interests.

Concerning the effectiveness of teaching materials, Clark and Salomon (1986) introduce the following four propositions based on their research concerning how teaching materials influence learning.

First Proposition: No teaching material is superior to any other when students are given learning tasks.

The results of research on using materials in class have not been able to determine which material is better than others. All teaching materials seem to be effective for meeting teaching objectives. In short, learning is more likely influenced by the content rather than the material itself.

Second Proposition: In any learning situation, improvements do not solely come from the material.

Since World War II, each decade has brought to the world more promising new educational materials, such as films, television, micro-computers and videos. Many people have tended to believe that those new materials could improve learning. However, when the results of learning were analyzed, improvements were more attributable to overall improvement in the teaching situation than to the new materials. Furthermore, introducing new teaching materials does not automatically improve learning situations, although it may increase students' motivation.

Third Proposition: The quality of learning depends on the degree to which the materials used in the classroom motivate the students to learn, rather than the material itself.

Students' positive attitudes toward using the material is more significant than the

material itself. The material does not necessarily make the difference, but it is students' opinions of the value of the material that influence their learning. For example, if the teacher shows a film to reinforce the importance of a course, but students view the film as a recreational activity rather than as instruction, using the film becomes less effective.

Fourth Proposition: Simple, inexpensive teaching materials are better than complex, expensive materials.

Since we cannot prove one teaching material is better than any other, it is reasonable to use inexpensive materials, but only if they actually help students facilitate their learning.

7. Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

One of the American college course syllabuses that I analyzed described course requirements such as papers and presentation in detail, but the professor never indicated the grade for each assignment. Therefore, when students receive their final grade they will not know how they ended up getting a certain grade. A more specific grading scheme would be better understood by the students.

The section for course requirements and grading scheme should include descriptions of assignments, quizzes, exams and points or grades for each requirement. For example, in my Advanced TOEFL syllabus, I describe how many points quizzes are worth, what the purpose of quizzes are, what quizzes contain and when they are given. This information clearly shows students what they need to prepare for each quiz. Also, course requirements give students an idea of the overall picture of what teachers expect them to do during the course and what grade they can obtain for each requirement. Pregent (1994, p.7) says, "If you actually take into account the expectations your students have for the course, you will increase the chances of commitment and active participation."

8. Schedule

Pregent (1994) refers to a schedule of topics, learning activities, assignments, quizzes, exams, chapters and pages of the text as a course syllabus. The course syllabus usually includes contents to be covered each week and corresponding activities, pages or chapters to be read each week, and assignments. In my Advanced TOEFL class, the course syllabus includes main skills students will learn in each class and which chapters of the text will be covered, dates for quizzes and due dates for assignments.

9. Additional information

Most ESL/EFL syllabuses do not include this section, but I believe this is a very significant section for the students. Since many students do not have good ideas about how effectively they can improve their language skills, this section provides good information, such as good learning materials they can study on their own at home or school. For example, in my Advanced TOEFL class, I introduced TOEFL Power Prep software, which is not well known among students. I mentioned that this software is available at the school's self-study room and that it is a good material to use in preparing for the CBT TOEFL. I also explained the good features of this software.

This kind of information provides opportunities for the students to utilize available materials to improve their language skills. Although not all the students take advantage of this additional information section, encouraging them to have more learning opportunities will be beneficial to many students.

10. Conclusion

Brindley (1984) says that when teachers and students meet in the classroom for the first time, they have different expectations regarding what will be learned in the class and how it will be learned. Thus an effectively designed syllabus becomes an effective communication tool between teachers and students (Willing 2001).

In many Japanese college EFL classes, the lack of this communication tool, namely an effective syllabus, creates ambiguity concerning what students will learn, how they will learn and what they are going to achieve in their course. An effective syllabus will not only help teachers give clear goals and directions for the class, but also help students identify what they need to do to succeed in their class. Angelo and Cross (1993, p.5) say, "When students focus more clearly, participate more actively, and feel more confident that they can succeed, they are likely to do better in their course work." In conclusion, developing an effective syllabus plays an important role in helping teachers improve classroom instruction and students' learning in Japanese EFL college classes.

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APPENDIX: Advanced TOEFL Class Syllabus

Konan University
Advanced TOEFL Class Syllabus
Spring 2001
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4:20-5:50 p.m.
Room 12-14

Instructor: Nobuo Tsuda

E-mail: nobuo@konan-u.ac.jp

Office: 15 gokan 306 (Nishi Koshya)

Office Hours: Monday 11:00-12:00 p.m. Tuesday 2:00-3:30 p.m.

Wednesday 1:00-2:30 p.m.

Thursday 2:00-3:30 p.m. (also by appointment)

Office Phone: 078-435-2361

Course Description:

This is an advanced TOEFL class and you'll have many opportunities to practice all the sections of the TOEFL.

Textbook:

Deborah Phillips (2001). *Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL*. New York: Longman

Goal:

The goal of this course is to help students obtain TOEFL scores of 550 in paper and pencil (213 in CBT) or above.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, the students will be able to:

1. become very familiar with the CBT TOEFL test.
2. finish the reading section within the time (in paper and pencil test).
3. develop various reading/listening/writing/structure skills.
4. read authentic materials without much difficulty.
5. increase vocabulary.
6. have a positive attitude toward studying English.

Basic Principles and Rules:

1. Your participation in the class is essential. If you don't understand or if you have any questions, please ask me during the class. Remember, there are no stupid questions. The purpose of the class is to learn from each other.
2. All the assignments must be completed and turned in on time. Unless previous permission is granted by the teacher, late work will not be accepted. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to get the assignment from a classmate or the teacher.
3. Plagiarism or any other form of cheating on any assignment or quiz will result in an automatic failing grade.
4. Be on time. If you are late more than five minutes for the class, you'll be marked absent. If you are late, you'll disrupt TOEFL practice activities as well as other students. In addition, you'll miss vital information about materials. Therefore, being on time is very essential to this course.
5. If you are absent more than 1/3 of the semester, you'll automatically fail this course.
6. If you happen to be sick on the day of a quiz, bring a receipt from a clinic or show me any other form of evidence. You'll be able to take the quiz on a different day.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme:

1. Homework (10 points)

Occasionally, you'll be asked to do your homework from the text.

2. Quizzes (150 points)

The purpose of quizzes is to find out whether you have acquired various skills that you have learned in each class. The questions will be based on the text that you'll study in the class. Also, you'll be required to read authentic reading materials prior to each quiz and you need to answer comprehension questions without looking at materials. The purpose of this comprehension quiz is not testing your memorization, but to see whether you generally understand the content of reading materials and express yourself in your own words in English. Dates are listed in the schedule.

3. TOEFL Sampler CD ROM (10 points)

Go to the 17 gokan self-study room. Work on the TOEFL sampler CD ROM based on the activity sheet. More detailed information will be given in the next class.

4. Reading summary report (15 points)

You'll be assigned to read a short story and write a short summary in English. More detailed information will be given in a couple of weeks.

5. DVD movie summary report (15 points)

Go to the 17 gokan self-study room and choose one DVD movie to watch. Then write a short summary in English. More detailed information will be given after you complete your reading summary.

Grading Scheme:

A 160 - 200 points

B 140 - 159 points

C 120 - 139 points

F Below 120 points

This letter grade is based on Konan University's grading standard.

Extra Credit may be earned in the following ways:

1. Go to the 17 gokan self-study room and read a 3,000 level graded reading book and write a summary in English.
2. Go to the 17 gokan self-study room and complete TOEFL Power prep CBT TOEFL test. Print out a score sheet and turn in.
3. Go to Konan University's Sakura lounge and interview an international student in English. Write the name of the person you interviewed with a list of questions and answers in English.

Due Date: July 12th

Schedule:

April 10th

Skills: Subject & verb, objects of prepositions, appositives

Text: Structure skills 1, 2, 3

April 12th

Skills: Main idea questions, Organization of ideas

Text: Reading skills 1, 2

April 17th

Skills: Focus on the last line, Synonyms, Avoid similar sounds

Text: Listening skills 1, 2, 3

Quiz #1

April 19th

Skills: Decode the topic, Develop supporting ideas, Present participles, Past participles

Text: Writing skills 1, 2 Structure skills 4, 5

April 24th

Skills: Stated detail questions, Find “unstated” details, Find pronoun referents

Text: Reading skills 3, 4

Quiz #2

April 26th

Skills: Draw conclusions about who, what, where. Listen to who & what in passives, Listen for who & what with multiple nouns

Text: Listening skills 4, 5, 6

TOEFL Sampler answer sheet due

May 1st

Skills: Write the introductory paragraph, Write unified supporting paragraphs, Use coordinate connectors, Use adverb time & cause connectors

Text: Writing skills 3, 4 Structure skills 6, 7

Quiz #3

The schedule after May 1st will be distributed at the end of April.

Useful Listening/reading Materials:

1. NPR (National Public Radio) www.npr.org: Bob Edwards Morning Edition, All Things Considered

These are popular American radio news programs and you can listen to up-to-date national as well as international news. On the website, you'll be able to see the summary of each news item. Although the level is advanced, the written summary will help

you understand the content and you can listen to the same news as many times as you want. Tapes and transcripts are available at reasonable cost.

2. TOEFL Powerprep Software

This software is available at the 17 gokan self-study room. This is the best software for the preparation for the computer-based TOEFL Test. Powerprep software features:

- Two timed computer-based tests with authentic TOEFL questions
- Same essay topics for writing practice
- Actual essays written by TOEFL test takers
- Score ranges chart at the end of each test

3. ESL graded readers

ESL graded readers are available at the 17 gokan reading room. Reading graded readers is good practice for increasing your reading speed. There are more than 100 books in the reading room.

4. Websites (Internet)

You should be able to find many listening and reading materials on websites. For example, you can read American newspapers such as The USA Today and the Washington Post.

5. Reader's Digest

Reader's Digest is a very popular monthly magazine in America. English used in the magazine isn't as difficult as Newsweek or Time magazine. Each article is very brief (probably around three to five pages) and the magazine features various current topics of interests.