Key Concepts in Language Teaching and Learning

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English for Academic Purposes Syllabus Design—A Multimedia, Task-based Approach

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Introduction

Having worked for five years in private-sector education, where my students generally had short-term goals, I was looking forward to moving to a state-sector university and working on longer-term projects. This move happened last year, and I soon realized that things did not work quite the same in a government institution[1]. First of all, work proceeds at a slower pace. For example, since the 1990s it has been widely acknowledged that our university preparatory year is not giving students adequate English language skills for their freshman studies. Needs analyses were done in 1997 and 2001. Even as I write, yet another needs analysis is being performed with a view to finally amending the preparatory year syllabus during the summer break. Another problem that exists in a public-sector university is the increased bureaucracy. An example of which is that syllabus design must be open to suggestions from the university administration. One of their suggestions that must be implemented in the amended syllabus is the use of technology in the classroom. As I am the preparatory year CALL (computer-assisted language learning) coordinator, one of my responsibilities is to contribute towards the development of multimedia-based teaching materials to be used in a new syllabus. This essay will look at the development of a small section of a multimedia, task-based syllabus and attempt to answer the following questions:

1) does a multimedia, task-based syllabus have the potential to facilitate the second language acquisition (SLA) of our preparatory year students?
2) does this syllabus have any potential flaws that may limit its successful implementation in the classroom?

In the essay, I will start by giving an outline of multimedia and reasons for using it in the classroom. Next, there will be a brief discussion on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and why task-based language teaching (TBLT) is frequently used in the EAP classroom. This will be followed by a description of the design of a small task-based syllabus incorporating the use of multimedia. Next, in the discussion stage of the essay, the potential of the syllabus to facilitate SLA will be evaluated using Gass's model of SLA as a reference. Finally, the syllabus will then be further evaluated as to whether there are any potential problems that may hinder its successful implementation in the classroom.

1 Background

1.1 What is a multimedia classroom?

1.1.1 Basic design

A multimedia classroom is equipped with multimedia devices designed to enhance instruction and learning. In a discussion about the ideal multimedia classroom, Eskicioglu and Kopec (2003:6) state that the key elements in a multimedia classroom are: networked computers, storage devices, printers, scanners, LCD projectors, electronic whiteboards, digital cameras and camcorders. In addition to these hardware devices, a variety of software—such as videos, word processing packages and educational packages—and the Internet/WorldWideWeb are available. This hardware and software is used in combination, depending on the teaching needs. Figures 1 and 2 show the layout and use of a multimedia classroom (NTID Learning Centre in New York).
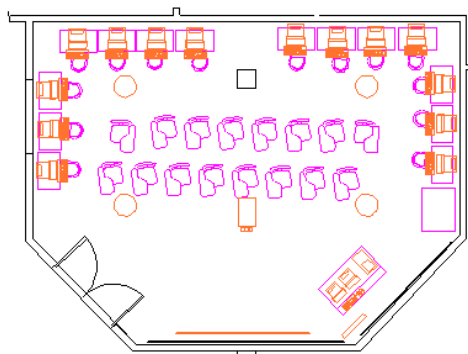
Fig 1.1 layout of multimedia classroom   Fig 1.2 multimedia classroom in use

1.1.2 Reasons for using multimedia

Eskicioglu and Kopec (2003:5) state that classroom multimedia has two main uses: the natural presentation of information as text, graphics, images, audio and video, and the non-linear navigation through applications to access the needed information. They (ibid:5-6) believe that multimedia can "provide a multi-sensory experience" in the classroom, enhancing the learning experience in the process. They cite surveys (Fletcher, 1991; Todd, 1997; Shelley, Wagonner, Cashman & Wagonner, 1998) showing that learners retain significantly more when they see, hear and interact simultaneously. Furthermore, in a discussion on computers and language learning, Warschauer and Healey (1998) state that using computers in the classroom can facilitate language instruction by providing

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"multimodal practice with feedback, individualization in a large class, pair and small group work on projects, the fun factor, variety in the resources available and learning styles used, exploratory learning with large amounts of language data, and real-life skill-building in computer use". Multimedia, in particular the internet, can also provide learners with a link to the real world, thereby bridging the gap between the learning and use of language.

1.2 What is EAP?

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) "is concerned with the teaching and learning of the English communication skills which are required for study purposes in formal tertiary education systems" (O'Loughlin, 2003:17). The key study activities—lectures/talks, seminars/tutorials, practicals, private study, reference of materials, essays/reports/theses, research and examinations (Jordan, 1997:6-7)—place an emphasis on academic tasks and skills; therefore, task-based syllabi have been widely used to teach EAP. In the next section, the design of a small task-based syllabus that will be used to teach EAP is described.

2 Designing a multimedia, task-based syllabus

2.1 The syllabus, the university and the students

The syllabus is being designed for use in the preparatory year of a government-run engineering university in the Middle East. The language of instruction at the university is English. The students are secondary school graduates, male, in their late teens, and have achieved high marks in government and university entrance examinations. However, their level of English varies widely, and, although not acknowledged officially, students are streamed based on their English language ability[2]. On average, only 50% of the students pass the preparatory year at the first attempt. In addition, those students who do pass are generally regarded as having insufficient English language skills for their freshman studies. It is planned to develop more appropriate materials for the preparatory year during the summer break, and the syllabus described in this essay may form part of these materials[3].

2.2 Stages in the design process

Both Long (1985) and Ellis (2003:229-30) outline four key stages in the design process. First,

a needs analysis is performed to identify target tasks. Then, the target tasks are classified into target task-types. Next, pedagogic tasks and materials are derived and developed from the target task-types. After that, the pedagogic tasks are sequenced to form a task-based syllabus[4].

2.2.1 Identification of target tasks

The needs analysis (Rindfleisch, 1997) produced by the university identified final performance objectives in the four main EAP skills areas—reading, listening, writing and speaking[5]. It is beyond the scope of this essay to develop the whole syllabus: instead, the syllabus will focus on one general final performance objective, i.e. understanding and describing processes. The target tasks in Table 2.1 have been identified based on this final performance objective.

skill area	target task
reading	1. locating relevant sources describing a process 2. comprehending the sources 3. locating specific information in the sources
listening	4. comprehending a presentation describing a process 5. taking usable notes reflecting the content of this presentation
writing	6. describing a process in point format
speaking	7. describing a process orally

Table 2.1: skill areas and target tasks

(Note: These target tasks will be referred to as Target Tasks 1 to 7.)

2.2.2 Classifying target tasks into target task-types

The above target tasks can be classified into the following task-types.

target task	task-type
1	internet search
2	reading web-based articles for gist
3	reading web-based articles for specific information
4	watching video clips for gist
5	watching video clips for specific information
6	creating powerpoint graphics for an oral presentation
7	oral presentation using powerpoint

Table 2.2: target tasks and task types

The design features and the key dimensions of each task type can now be specified using Ellis's general task framework (Ellis, 2003:217) as a reference. In this framework, tasks have four design features: **input**—the nature of the input provided in the task; **conditions**—the way in which information is presented to the learners and the way in which it is to be used; **processes**—the nature of the cognitive operations and the discourse the task requires; and **outcomes**—the nature of the product that results from performing the task. For example, in target task 1, the internet search, the input is written and tightly organized, i.e. there is a rigid set of sub-tasks: type in the search words, scan through the resultant data, pick out relevant data. As the task is done in pairs, the information is shared, two-way and requires interaction. The task is convergent as the participants must agree on an outcome. Explanation and reasoning are necessary to complete the task successfully and the discourse mode is dialogic. The outcome medium is oral and the discourse mode is a list—the participants must verbally agree on a list of possible choices. Finally, the scope is open as many options are available to the participants. The other tasks have been designed accordingly (see Appendix A for details). The pedagogic tasks and materials can now be derived and developed.

2.2.3 Deriving and developing pedagogic tasks and materials

2.2.3.1 Thematic and linguistic content

The main aim of the course is to improve students' EAP skills, not to teach them new engineering concepts. The thematic content of the syllabus must be familiar to the students. Bearing this in mind, the syllabus will be based on topics they have studied while in secondary school (learning in Arabic). One theme that stands out is describing the processes involved in laboratory experiments. Students typically have to explain the sequence of events and the relationship between these events. In order to achieve this goal, the linguistic content must also be considered. Describing a process will require the use of sequence words (*first*, *next*, *after that*, *finally*, etc.), cause and effect relationships (*this leads to*, *as a result*, *this causes*, etc) and passive voice. This linguistic content can be taught by a *focus on form*, which is discussed in the next section.

2.2.3.2 Focus on form

Focus on form[6] can be incorporated in a task in many ways, "such as implicit negative feedback, or recasts of learner forms, brief written illustration of the correct form, brief rule explanations, input enhancement of forms in aural and written texts used on task, and a

variety of other techniques" (Robinson, 1998). Most of these are related to methodology, but input enhancement of forms in aural and written texts can be included at syllabus design level. The material used for target tasks 4 and 5 will probably be made in-house, so this will give the syllabus designer an opportunity to allow for input enrichment. However, students will select their own written texts for target tasks 2 and 3, leaving the designer with little opportunity to incorporate a specific focus on form[7]. The outcome medium of target tasks 3 and 5 is written, so the specific information required could be selected so as to incorporate the required linguistic content implicitly. For example, the following task, implicitly focusing on sequence words by providing enriched input in the outcome, could be used.

Read the article and write the steps of the process described in the spaces provided:

First, _____

Next, _____

After that, _____

Following this, _____

 _____, _____

 _____, _____

 _____, _____

Finally, _____

Fig 2.1: task with implicit focus on form in the outcome

2.2.4 Sequencing pedagogic tasks to form a task-based syllabus

Once the tasks have been developed, they must be sequenced in order to maximize learning. One method of sequencing tasks is to identify sub-tasks which are necessary for the successful completion of the target task, and to sequence these sub-tasks accordingly. This is a particularly useful strategy for EAP tasks. Marco (2002:23), referring to an ESP course outlined by Kimball (1998), believes that:

> Tasks are a vehicle for presenting samples of the target language. Teachers design the tasks to pose problems of relevance to the students, who then have to solve them, not simply by collecting information, but by engaging in sub-tasks of increasing complexity.

The target tasks in the above syllabus have been sequenced based on this approach. The syllabus is broken into a series of sub-tasks which provide the skills necessary to perform the main target task, an oral presentation. Table 2.10 below shows the sequence of target tasks in the syllabus[8].

sequence	task-type	outcomes
target task 4 (sub-task 1)	watching video clips for gist	improves listening skills, provides students with model of final task
target task 5 (sub-task 2)	watching video clips for specific information	improves listening skills, provides students with linguistic content necessary to complete the final task
target task 1 (sub-task 3)	internet search	improves reading skills, enables students to locate potential sources
target task 2 (sub-task 4)	reading web-based articles for gist	improves reading skills, enables students to locate relevant sources
target task 3 (sub-task 5)	reading web-based articles for specific information	improves reading skills, provides students with thematic and linguistic content necessary to complete the final task
target task 6 (sub-task 6)	creating powerpoint graphics for oral presentation	improves writing skills, enables students to focus on key parts of a presentation
target task 7 (main task)	oral presentation using powerpoint	improves speaking skills, enables students to give a presentation

Table 2.3: sequence, task type and outcomes

3 Discussion

3.1 Does the syllabus have the potential to facilitate second language acquisition (SLA)?

3.1.1 What is SLA?

In a discussion concerning the theories of SLA, Brown (2000:271) states that:

SLA is … a subset of general human learning, involves cognitive variations, is closely related to one's personality type, is interwoven with second culture learning, and involves interference, the creation of new linguistics systems, and the learning of discourse and communicative functions of language.

This is a complex answer to a seemingly straightforward question. Likewise, Ellis (1994:15) says that there is no simple answer to the above question. However, he states that "the goal of SLA is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic and communicative competence" (ibid).

Many theories, such as Krashen's **Input Hypothesis** (1981), Long's **Interaction Hypothesis** (1996) and Swain **Output Hypothesis** (1995), have been put forward to describe the process of SLA. The prevalent view is that all three stages—input, interaction and output—play a role in SLA. Block (2003) says that "it is Gass who has provided the most comprehensive model along these lines". This model, with boxes depicting the key stages in the language acquisition process and circles depicting the mediating factors that occur before these stages, is shown in figure 3.1 below.

3.1.2 Gass's model of SLA

Gass's model sees the SLA process as having five key stages[9]. The first is **apperceived input**, where learners notice incoming information, relate it to prior knowledge and then use it to construct meaningful units that can then be analyzed. The next is **comprehended input**, where input is comprehended either for immediate ongoing conversations or as the starting point in the learning process. After this, **intake**, the stage at which new language features are assimilated by learners, occurs. Following this is the **integration** stage, where, as a result of cognitive processing, learners' grammars are developed and stored. Finally, **output** is produced. Gass sees output as providing input to be fed into the process again, not just as the end product.

The next section will discuss how the syllabus outlined in this essay has the potential to facilitate SLA, using Gass's model as a reference.

3.1.3 Using Gass's model to evaluate the potential of the syllabus to facilitate SLA

Input

The syllabus will provide two types of input—listening texts and reading texts. The listening texts allow for *input enrichment*, as the targeted feature can be made more frequent and/or salient (Ellis, 2003:158). Also, *comprehensible input* can be provided, allowing students to progress from their current level, *i*, "to *i+1*, the next level along the natural order, by

input

frequency ⟶ affect

prior knowledge ⟶ attention

apperceived input

negotiation ⟶ native speaker modification

comprehended input

universals

prior linguistic knowledge

universals ⟶ L1 knowledge

L2 knowledge ⟶ quality of analysis

intake

hypothesis formation ⟶ hypothesis testing   hypothesis rejection/ modification/ confirmation

integration

storage ⟶ grammar

personality   mode (oral/written)

situation

output

Fig 3.1 Gass's model of Second Language Acquisition (Gass and Selinker, 2001:401)

understanding input containing *i+1*" (Krashen, 1985:2). Enriched and comprehensible input will also be incorporated in some of the output activities that implicitly focus on form (see Figure 2.1 on page 7).

Apperceived input

In Gass's model, there are four interrelated factors necessary for input to be apperceived.

The first of these factors is **frequency**. Gass (Gass and Selinker, 2001:402) says that "something which is frequent is very likely to be noticed". The enriched input of the listening and reading texts will provide frequency.

The second factor is **prior knowledge**. Gass (ibid) believes that "[l]earning involves integration of new knowledge with prior knowledge…[p]rior knowledge is one of the factors that determine whether the input is meaningful". The content on the syllabus is based on secondary-school level science topics, so students should have some prior general knowledge, albeit in their first language. The linguistic content may be new to students, but the task activities will allow for implicit learning of any new linguistic content[10].

The third factor is **affect**, which includes "social distance, status, motivation, and attitude" (ibid). The multimedia aspect of the syllabus will have a positive effect by "stimulat[ing] students and enag[ing] them with the material" (Eskicioglu and Kopec, 2003:5-6), "providing the *fun factor*" (Warschauer and Healey, 1998), and shortening the social distance between the students and the target language community.

The final factor is **attention**. Gass (Gass and Selinker, 2001:403) states that "[a]ttention is important because it allows the learner to notice a mismatch between what he or she knows about the second language and what is produced by speakers of the second language". By recognizing the mismatch, learners can start to make amendments to their language. Dealing with a native speaker on a one-to-one basis can be a daunting task for many learners, thereby inhibiting learning. The syllabus will use multimedia to simulate real-world situations (e.g. presentations), but will give students the opportunity to replay and reuse materials, consequently allowing them to attend to language gaps in their own time.

Comprehended input

This is different from comprehensible input in that it is learner-controlled (ibid:404). Typically, learner comprehension is "at the level of semantics. However, there is a broader meaning of the word, one that includes comprehension of structure as well as meaning" (ibid). Learners may comprehend the meaning of a phrase, but cannot analyze it linguistically. This is important because "one factor that determines whether a particular instance of comprehended input will result in intake is the level of analysis of the input a learner achieves" (ibid:405). How can we determine if second language is comprehended? Gass believes that "prior knowledge forms the basis for comprehension" (ibid:406). Prior knowledge acts as the hook on which the new input can be hung. It allows learners to analyze the input in terms of both thematic and linguistic content.

As mentioned above, students will be familiar with the syllabus content, which will assist them in comprehending meaning. In addition, new linguistic knowledge will be taught either implicitly or explicitly, thereby giving students the opportunity to perform linguistic analysis on target-like language. The playback feature of multimedia will give students more time to perform this analysis; as a result, they are likely to comprehend the input at both a semantic and linguistic level.

Intake

Grammar is not necessarily formed in the previous stages; it will be formed at the intake and integration stages. "[I]ntake is the process of assimilating linguistic material" and "is the mental activity that mediates between input and grammars" (ibid:406). But intake is influenced by many interrelated factors—universals, L2 knowledge, L1 knowledge and quality of analysis. These all have an effect on the psycholinguistic processing taking place during the intake phase. Gass (ibid:406-7) views this processing as having three key stages: hypothesis formation, hypothesis testing and hypothesis rejection/modification/confirmation.

Opportunities for intake occur in the syllabus—at the explicit/implicit learning of linguistic content and in the preparation stages of the presentation. The nature of multimedia can also assist with intake: the playback feature and the ability to search for more information can aid students in hypothesis formation.

Integration

According to Gass (ibid:408-9), intake can result in three possibilities. The first is **new second language grammar**, where hypotheses formed at the intake stage can be confirmed or rejected, thereby creating new grammar. The next is the **strengthening of second language grammar**—the grammar already exists, but the input acts to strengthen it. The final possibility is **storage**—the input has been understood to a certain extent, but not enough to be incorporated by learners into their grammars. It is stored for later processing. The first two possibilities result in full integration, the latter in only partial integration.

The design and sequence of tasks in the syllabus should allow for language to be integrated by allowing for more negotiation for meaning (NfM) [11]. In a discussion on research into the negotiation for meaning, Skehan (1998:133) says that by creating more opportunities for NfM **a)** higher quality, more finely tuned input is produced and **b)** there is more flexibility in the interlanguage system and a greater willingness to explore language and try out hypotheses; thereby creating "conditions more appropriate for interlanguage development to occur". He cites a number of studies (Duff, 1986; Long, 1989; Yule et al, 1992; Plough and Gass, 1993; van Lier 1996) which indicate that tasks that are two-way, convergent, allow students to work in familiar pairs and perform after taking the hearer's role have a greater influence on NfM. The tasks in the above syllabus are generally of this nature (see Appendix A). In addition, the tasks are sequenced so that students will first receive input and then use the content of the input to produce output. The sequence of tasks will then be repeated. This process should allow for greater NfM, allowing students to progress from the storage stage, if necessary, to the strengthening stage. Furthermore, multimedia will allow for greater integration by giving students more opportunities to interact with the target language.

Output

"[T]he output component represents more than the product of language knowledge; it is an active part of the entire learning process" (Gass and Selinker, 2001:410). Gass sees output as providing feedback loops to both the intake and comprehended input stages. Output allows hypotheses to be tested and the resultant feedback will allow learners to adjust their second language grammars accordingly. Output also forces learners to think about syntax as well as semantics. Feedback on output syntax results in a loop to the comprehended input stage for negotiation. Gass (ibid) also believes that learner differences can have an effect on output.

For example, shy learners may be reluctant to speak, and other learners may be able to produce oral output but have problems with written output.

The syllabus has been designed to allow for as much feedback as possible, thereby creating more opportunities for NfM. Firstly, students will work in pairs, thereby ensuring constant peer feedback. Secondly, as the syllabus consists of sub-tasks, each having some form of output, leading up to the main task, there will be many opportunities for teacher feedback. Output will be in both oral and written form, thereby diminishing the effects of learner differences. The model of the presentation and the chance for shyer students to do their presentation after the second round of tasks should help lessen learner anxieties.

This section has shown that the above syllabus has the potential to facilitate SLA consistent with Gass's model. However, until implementation, there are no guarantees that it will actually do so. The next section will discuss possible problems that may affect the successful implementation of the syllabus.

3.2 Problems that may affect the implementation of the syllabus in the classroom

This section will discuss four potential problem areas. The first problem, the lack of research into macro-evaluations of task-based courses and the sequencing of tasks, directly affects syllabus design but will ultimately affect syllabus implementation. The other three problems, the innovativeness of the syllabus, learner differences and student assessment, are directly concerned with the implementation stage.

3.2.1 Macro-evaluation of task-based courses—sequencing of tasks

While there has been extensive research into the effectiveness of individual tasks, little has been done evaluating task-based courses. Ellis (2003:326) gives the example of Beretta and Davies' (1985) evaluation of The Communication Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1987), but there is little other data available. The sequencing of tasks within a course is a particular problem. Ellis (2003:220) states that this sequencing involves "determining the complexity of individual tasks so that the tasks can be matched to the learners' level of development". He attempts to combine various criteria for grading tasks (Candlin, 1987; Brindley, 1989; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998; and Robinson 2001) into a general grading scheme (Ellis, 2003:221-229). In this scheme, task complexity is based on criteria relating to input, conditions,

processes and outcomes of tasks. However, as Ellis (2003:221) admits himself, "little is known about how they interrelate to determine complexity" and "grading tasks cannot follow a precise algorithmic procedure but rather must proceed more intuitively in accordance with a general assessment of task complexity, informed by the criteria considered above and by the designer's experience of how particular groups of learners respond to different tasks" (ibid:227). The above syllabus attempts to ease this problem by breaking down the main task into the sub-tasks necessary for successful completion. However, this syllabus will only be a part of a much larger syllabus; therefore, the problem of task complexity and sequencing still remains.

3.2.2 Innovativeness of the syllabus

Ellis (2003:32) states that "[o]verall, task-based teaching, while superficially simple, is complex". Using communicative activities to enhance acquisition is not a difficult concept; however, knowing when to teach linguistic content, either explicitly or implicitly, is a complex issue. The above syllabus uses material that implicitly focuses on form. However, there will be occasions when teachers may need to explicitly focus on form. This is more of a methodological problem than a design problem; therefore, inexperienced teachers, or teachers used to other methodologies, may have difficulties implementing the syllabus effectively. Adequate training and support for teachers will be necessary.

Furthermore, the use of multimedia creates additional implementation problems. Firstly, the technology is expensive. Secondly, teachers will need to be trained to use multimedia teaching tools effectively. But what should the focus of this training be? Eskicioglu and Kopec (2003:8) ask if "the primary goal [is] to make the instructor technically competent or to focus on new pedagogic approaches made possible by IT". They answer this by citing an observation made at a National Science Foundation workshop (1996) that using multimedia "increases the variety of needs for training, including the use of IT itself, applications and teaching techniques". Hence, a comprehensive training and support system needs to be put in place before multimedia can be used effectively in the classroom. This training will be expensive and time-consuming, but if teachers are not provided with it, the investment in the hardware, software and infrastructure of a multimedia classroom will be wasted[12].

3.2.3 Learner differences

The above syllabus is a procedural syllabus, i.e. a syllabus in which "interlanguage development will occur as a result of the way learners have to transact tasks" (Skehan, 1998:265). In this type of syllabus, "all learners are treated as the same, and it is assumed that a diet of tasks, properly implemented, will bring about better fluency, restructuring [of interlanguage] and accuracy" (ibid:266). Learner differences are not addressed in the syllabus design. Furthermore, in a discussion about the effects of pedagogic tasks on second language learner production, Robinson (2001:29) has outlined three factors, *task complexity*, *task difficulty* and *task conditions*, which influence the ease with which learners are able to do various tasks. Task complexity, for example, "whether a task requires a single step to be performed, or dual, or multiple simultaneous steps, or whether reasoning demands are low or absent, versus high" (Robinson, 2003:48), can account for "*within learner* variance when performing any two tasks" (ibid, 2001:30). Therefore, it can be directly influenced by the syllabus designer. Task difficulty, on the other hand, may account for *between learner* variance. It is the result of "the *learner factors* that may make a task more or less difficult" (ibid:31). These "*learner factors* … are of two kinds: **1)** *affective* variables, such as confidence, motivation and anxiety, …, and **2)** *ability* variables, such as intelligence, aptitude, and cognitive style". Finally, "*task conditions*, or the interactive demands of tasks, involve neither task factors nor learner factors alone, but rather participation factors such as direction of information flow and the communicative goals of task performance" (ibid:32). Both *task difficulty* and *task conditions* cannot be directly influenced by the syllabus designer and must be dealt with by teachers using appropriate methodology and pedagogy at the implementation stage of the syllabus. Skehan (1998:266) believes that problems arising from between-learner differences can be reduced by teachers knowing: **a)** "what learning strengths and weaknesses as well as what preferences different students have", and **b)** "how tasks can be implemented to take account of these factors". However, as with the previous problem, this places an additional burden on teachers, and adequate training and support will be essential.

3.2.4 Assessment

"A task-based test consists of: **1)** a task; **2)** an implementation procedure; and **3)** a performance measure" (Ellis, 2003:286). A task-based test for the above syllabus would involve assessing students on their oral presentation skills. In the preparatory year course at which the syllabus is aimed, there are over 500 students. Logistically, the test would be very

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difficult to implement due to time and personnel constraints. It could be done on a continual assessment basis, but reliability would become an issue. Scoring would involve external ratings carried out by raters. Ellis (ibid:310) believes that this is "especially problematic" as it is very difficult to ensure inter-rater consistency[13]. Therefore, implementing an assessment system that ensures inter-rater consistency for the above syllabus will be extremely difficult.

Conclusion

According to Gass's model, learners acquire a second language in five key stages: apperceived input, comprehended input, intake, integration and output. This paper has shown that, in theory, a task-based syllabus has the potential to facilitate the acquisition of EAP by preparatory year students. Input will be apperceived by using a combination of input enrichment and comprehensible input. Comprehension of input will be facilitated by using material familiar to students and by the explicit or implicit teaching of the target language. This explicit or implicit teaching, as well as the preparation stages of the presentation, assists with intake by allowing students to form hypotheses. The syllabus will also require students to use the output from one sub-task as the input for another sub-task. This will improve language integration as it will give students opportunities to negotiate for meaning and to test and reject/confirm/modify hypotheses formed earlier. Finally, the use of sub-tasks will provide many opportunities for output, thereby allowing for much peer and teacher feedback, leading to negotiation for meaning.

The paper has also shown the potential of multimedia to further enhance the language acquisition process. Multimedia can simulate real-world situations, which will stimulate and engage students, thereby helping at the apperceived input stage. The playback and search feature of multimedia will give students more time and information to analyze language and form hypotheses. Multimedia will also allow students to interact with target language, providing further opportunities for language integration.

However, there are a number of problems that may affect the implementation of the syllabus in the classroom. The lack of research into macro-evaluations of task-based courses and the sequencing of tasks means that the syllabus designer must rely on intuition rather than on a precise design algorithm. The innovativeness of the syllabus, the handling of learner

differences and student assessment all require that teachers are provided with an adequate training and support system, without which the successful implementation of the syllabus will be very difficult to achieve.

In conclusion, in order to truly judge the effectiveness of the above multimedia-enhanced, task-based syllabus in facilitating SLA, the syllabus must first be implemented in the classroom. However, because of the implementation problems mentioned above, the syllabus would first need to be implemented on a small-scale, using teachers with adequate task-based language teaching and computer skills. After this, appropriate training and support systems could be designed, the syllabus broadened and teachers trained. If this is achieved, I believe that a multimedia, task-based syllabus may indeed have the potential to facilitate second language acquisition for preparatory year students at our institution.

Notes

1   This government institution is in a developing country. I would like to think that government institutions in developed countries are a little more progressive.

2   The entrance exam consists of three parts, English, science and mathematics, so doing poorly in English doesn't necessarily mean that students cannot enter the preparatory year.

3   As students' English skills are poor on entering the preparatory year, my syllabus would be used in the second term of instruction.

4   Long (1985) adds three more stages to the process: implementing the syllabus with appropriate methodology and pedagogy, task-based assessment, and program evaluation.

5   Data from a new needs analysis has yet to be released. As I expect the new data to be similar to that of the needs analysis performed in 1997, the syllabus is based on the 1997 data.

6 Robinson (1998) defines focus on form as the situation "where individuals or groups of learners are heard [or seen] repeatedly producing non-target-like forms, [and] teacher intervention to provide corrective feedback is recommended".

7 Students could be 'advised' on which materials to select, thereby giving the designer some form of input control, but this would diminish the 'taskness' of the task.

8 Students will work in pairs on all the tasks, with the exception of the final task, the oral presentation, which will be given by only one student. The sequence of tasks will be repeated, thereby giving the second student an opportunity to perform the final task.

9 The input stage occurs before the first of these five stages. However, Gass does not supply too much detail about the input stage. She simply states that "learners are exposed to a body of second language data" (Gass and Selinker, 2001:400). This is the catalyst for the SLA process to take place.

10 The tasks will be designed to allow for implicit learning. In reality, at the methodology stage, new linguistic content may be taught explicitly.

11 Long (1996:418) defines *negotiation for meaning* as "the process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved." (Note: In this essay, negotiation *for* meaning is interchangeable with negotiation *of* meaning.)

12 I have personal experience of this situation: while teaching at a private business college in Thailand, a 30-computer multimedia lab lay virtually idle due to the inability of the teaching staff to use the technology effectively because of lack of training and, consequently, motivation.

13 Having just been one of the markers for a mid-term writing exam, I would personally agree with his comment. Despite that fact that the exam output was a straightforward two-paragraph essay, there were only 15 markers, and a standardization meeting, the marking was inconsistent.

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Appendix A: Target-Task Design

input	• medium: written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: oral • discourse mode: list • scope: open

Table 1: Target Task 1 – internet search

input	• medium: written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: oral • discourse mode: summary • scope: closed

Table 2: Target Task 2 – reading web-based articles for gist

input	• medium: written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: written • discourse mode: list • scope: closed

Table 3: Target Task 3 – reading web-based articles for specific information

input	• medium: oral/written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: oral • discourse mode: summary • scope: closed

Table 4: Target Task 4 –watching video clips for gist

input	• medium: oral/written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: written • discourse mode: list • scope: closed

Table 5: Target Task 5 – watching video clips for specific information

input	• medium: written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: written • discourse mode: list • scope: closed

Table 6: Target Task 6 – creating powerpoint graphics for an oral presentation

input	• medium: written • organization: tight
conditions	• information configuration: shared • interactant relationship: two-way • interaction requirement: required • orientation: convergent
processes	• cognitive: explaining/reasoning • discourse mode: dialogic
outcomes	• medium: oral • discourse mode: description • scope: closed

Table 7: Target Task 7 – oral presentation using powerpoint