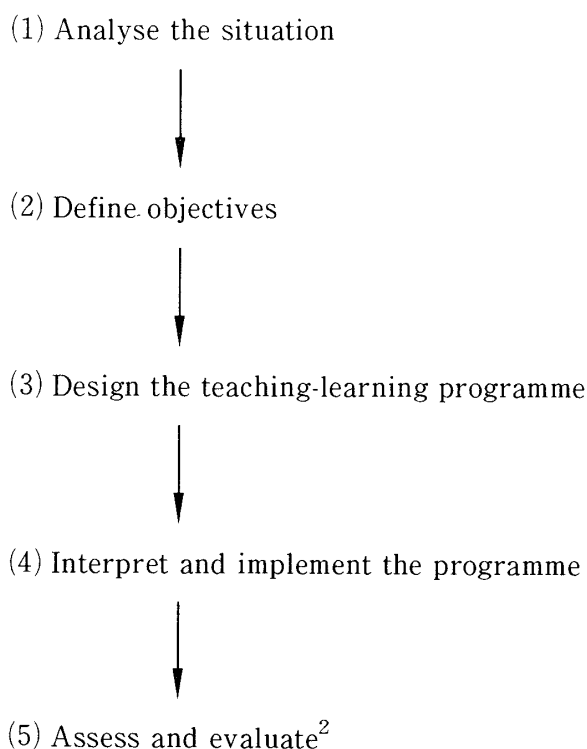


## **Applying a Situational Model to Development of a Writing Syllabus**

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In this paper I intend to apply a situational model for syllabus development to a freshman composition course in a 2-year college. I have chosen a model that takes into account not only second language acquisition and language theory but also extra-linguistic factors such as institutional policy, student needs and cultural values. By balancing theoretical ideals against the realities of the learning environment, it provides a realistic foundation for the selection and sequencing of appropriate materials.

I will adapt the situational model originally proposed by Skilbeck for school-wide curriculum development. This model has the advantage of simplicity and directionality, although the actual development process is more complex as Skilbeck himself admits. Progression is seldom as neat as it appears in the diagram below ; there is a large amount of overlap between the five stages. The model does, however, provide an outline that manages to "... embrace both objectives and process models ...".<sup>1</sup>



## Analysis of Situation

We need to consider the existing curriculum and value sets of the teaching institution. The present English department curriculum in the 2-year women's college consists of a core of the 4 skills, electives emphasizing other aspects of English such as current English, British and American literature and culture, and general education courses. There is little communication between those teaching the different core courses within the department, so there is no agreed-upon "pedagogical grammar" to refer to when the teachers design their own courses. In the last few years, however, the college has begun publishing a collection of individual course syllabuses which can be consulted to get an overview of the curriculum.

Students' previous educational experiences will provide evidence of the underlying educational values of the society and will influence students' perceptions of the syllabus and their performance in classroom activities. Due to the extreme competitiveness in the Japanese educational system, the students' language-learning experience in high school is severely limited by their need to pass college entrance exams. The exam format with its emphasis on decontextualized language tends to become the model for learning, and this leads to memorization practices that imply a one-to-one equivalence between the Japanese and the English lexicon, an attitude which is reflected in the widespread use of bilingual dictionaries as word lists rather than as references. On top of that, L2 writing in secondary education is treated as sentence translation rather than as paragraph-length composing. The implications quickly become apparent in the composition classroom: students apply word-for-word and phrase-for-phrase translation strategies that ignore English textual patterns and result in vague or incomprehensible paragraphs. It is easy to see why most students don't regard L2 writing as communication. In fact, many English majors come into the college believing that oral proficiency alone is sufficient as an indicator of communicative ability.

## Defining Objectives :

According to White, objectives are to be defined "... as desirable student learnings. . . they need to be clear, concise and to be capable of being understood by the learners themselves. . . ." <sup>3</sup> The second half of the above quotation implies a Type-A syllabus where teaching content is specified, but Skilbeck states that predetermined objectives should be "... dynamic in that they must be reviewed, modified and if necessary reformulated progressively as the teaching-learning process unfolds." <sup>4</sup> This kind of flexibility, a trademark of the Type-B learner/learning-oriented syllabus, takes into account the gap between what is being presented to the learner and what the learner actually absorbs from it, the assumption being that content will change based on the ongoing assessment of the learners themselves. The model proposes a compromise between the traditional syllabus, developed by the teacher beforehand and carried out as planned, and the retrospective process syllabus that relies on continuous learner feedback to determine future les-

son content. At the same time it acknowledges the realities of most teaching situations, that teachers are responsible not only for what they do in the classroom but also for how they communicate their objectives to the learners themselves.

White, paraphrasing Skilbeck, also makes the point that "... it is desirable to try to show that the objectives have a rational and legitimate basis."<sup>5</sup> From the students' viewpoint, the most legitimate of objectives would be to satisfy their present and future needs. The question arises as to how clear these needs are to the students themselves. At the 2-year college level, for example, students are only likely to see their present writing needs as a matter of passing the required core course, unless they are planning to take one of several elective courses which require L2 writing. With regard to their future, they often have no idea of what their English language needs will be. Given this situation, it is imperative that teachers inform them of three situations in which their L2 writing skills are likely to be required in the future: (1) if they take jobs in companies involved in business overseas, (2) if they transfer to 4-year colleges as English majors, and (3) if they go on to study abroad.

One source of data on English needs in business comes from a pilot study surveying a small number of multinational companies in the Tokyo region. Because of the limited sample, any conclusions must remain tentative. The study does, however, point to a trend that will no doubt intensify in the future with the continued internationalization and computerization of the world economy. The authors studied the English needs of employees and remark that,

"One of the most surprising results of this study is the prominence of English writing skills in the workplace, even at entry levels. . . . The direct implication is that writing skills must occupy a central place in the EFL curriculum."<sup>6</sup>

Of writing tasks, they mention fax, e-mail and in-house memos as the simplest because they are "routine" (by which the authors mean tasks based on shared information, having a set format and occurring frequently). Writing reports is considered the most difficult task, mostly because of the need for accuracy. To summarize, there is a need for L2 writing in a variety of formats and styles, of varying lengths and degrees of accuracy, under differing time pressures (e-mail requiring particularly fast response time) in a business situation.

Students who transfer to 4-year colleges and those who go on to study abroad will have similar needs: they must be able to present their ideas clearly in an academic paper. Students transferring to 4-year institutions within Japan are most likely to enter the English department where they will be required to write a paper in English for their seminar. Anyone who enters a college or university in an English-speaking country will be required as a matter of course to write papers in English on a regular basis.

Skilbeck categorizes objectives as opposite ends of a cline: "broad and general" vs "specific"; "long term" vs "short term"; "higher order cognitive" vs "lower order informa-

tional”; “global” vs “subject-specific.” First, we should specify the broad and general, long-term, higher-order cognitive, and global objectives. I have already touched on one, to get the students to redefine their idea of writing in the L2, from one of word-for-word translation to one of composing their ideas in the L2. Another objective would be to familiarize them with English textual patterns and structures, discourse markers, cohesion and genre. The third would be to ensure that they know how to use the tools necessary for effective written communication, in particular bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. Short-term, specific, lower-order informational, subject-specific objectives will be dealt with in a following stage of the model.

### **Designing the Teaching-Learning Programme :**

Skilbeck has proposed 9 “procedural principles” to be borne in mind when designing the program. These are outlined below :

“(1) fundamental orientation of the curriculum. . . ; (2) the groupings and combinations of subject matter ; (3) the groupings of students. . . ; (4) the relationship of learning in the different subject areas to the overall objectives of the curriculum, (5) the scope, sequence and structure of teaching content , (6) . . . resources, materials. . . ; (7) the proposed methods of teaching and learning ; (8) staffing needs and allocations, (9) timetabling and scheduling.”<sup>7</sup>

Because this model is being adapted to syllabus instead of curriculum, several of these principles have already been considered in the analysis of the situation (i. e., orientation of curriculum, groupings and combinations of subject matter). Other procedural principles have the following effect : The students are grouped according to the Japanese “alphabetical” order which results in classes of mixed ability. Staffing allocations determine the size of the writing classes, about 45 students per class. Each class is scheduled once a week for a 90-minute period, the maximum number of classes per academic year being 30. All these factors affect the teaching methods and the amount of homework that the teacher can be expected to check during the course of the year. Mixed-ability classes require open-ended tasks that are challenging for all the students without being too difficult for the weakest (peer help through group work becomes a valuable classroom organizational tool) . The large number of students per class discourages the teacher from assigning homework every week and suggests the need for several in-class tasks each week that can capture and hold the students’ attention for the entire 90-minute period.

What is the scope, sequencing and structure of the teaching contents? The following are ideas for design and sequencing:

1) The lack of a communicative aspect in L2 writing in Japanese secondary education is seen as a deterrent to motivation, and motivation should be given priority. Self-interest is a powerful factor in getting students to feel motivated, so diaries are inherently motivational: the students can write about themselves or anything that interests them. Diaries allow them to deploy the English that they have been exposed to for the past 6

years in junior and senior high school. Their diary writing can then serve as a basis for evaluating their writing skills.

2) There is a need for tasks requiring the use of both bilingual and monolingual learner's dictionaries to ensure that students know how to use them. Students are too often expected to know how to use a bilingual dictionary despite the fact that they are constantly demonstrating their ignorance by choosing definitions inappropriate to the context. They need to be coached. Because there is no one-to-one correspondence between any two languages, and particularly not between two languages as different as Japanese and English, students must be trained to search for the most appropriate definition among the examples rather than choosing the first one listed.

3) Due to the sheer volume of words per page in a monolingual dictionary, L2 learners are naturally more inclined to use a bilingual dictionary. Once again they need to be coached. They need to be convinced of the necessity and ease of using a monolingual learner's dictionary. Tasks should be assigned with the following strengths of a monolingual dictionary in mind: the simplified definitions give students more exposure to the L2, the examples are often from a modern English corpus and are always more authentic than examples found in a bilingual dictionary, and along the same lines there is more emphasis on collocation than in a bilingual dictionary. Repeated use of a monolingual dictionary should break down most students' reluctance to consult it.

4) There will also be topic-based tasks to get students to focus simultaneously on the different messages, formats and linguistic patterns of English. Pre-tasks should use authentic materials to familiarize students with genre, textual patterns and lexical usage before they are expected to produce it.

5) Finally, students will be introduced to writing processes for developing their ideas into well-organized papers (from brainstorming to the final draft). Once again authentic materials should be used as much as possible to familiarize the students with English organizational patterns.

### **Interpret and Implement the Programme**

1) Diaries will be the students' only homework for at least the first 10 weeks. The diaries will be collected twice, once several weeks into the course and the second time at the end of the 10-week period. They will be read and comments will be made solely on the basis of the content unless there are mistakes that render the writing incomprehensible. Suggestions will encourage the students to expand their writing beyond listing their daily activities, and with a set number of 2 to 4 pages per week, students will be under a time constraint. This should keep them from constant recourse to a dictionary and encourage them to compose in English as they write. Gradually they should build up fluency and confidence in their L2 writing skills.

2) The students will be given several English and Japanese sentences, each with one word underlined. Using their bilingual dictionaries, they will be asked to choose the correct definition from a number of possible translations in the other language. The difficul-

ty of each choice should make them aware that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the English and the Japanese lexicon. Then each group will be given an incomplete translation in English of a Japanese song. The students have to come up with the missing words, compare results, and present their best version to the class. The following week the groups will translate one verse of a well-known English song into Japanese, compare their results, and choose the best version.

3) Monolingual dictionaries will be used for discovering collocation mistakes in sentences from student diaries (edited by the teacher so that there is only one mistake per sentence) and correcting them. Using these sentences, groups will then participate in a quiz game, with points given out to the first team to find the mistake and to any team with an acceptable correction (there is often more than one). In another task, closer to what they will actually be doing as writers, they are given the outline of a well-known story in note form that they have to flesh out. All the necessary phrasal verbs will be provided, minus the prepositions, so that they have to consult their dictionaries for the appropriate preposition.

4) The following are several ideas for topic-based tasks. (a) Students can be asked to write down in note form their first memories. Then they are shown a short passage from a writer's reminiscences and asked to find out how many similarities there are between her/his memories and those on their list. Finally they write down their first memories based on their notes. (b) Students read a novel or newspaper description of a suspected criminal. Then they watch a video excerpt with at least five characters and choose one of the people in the excerpt as their suspect. They describe her/him and once they finish writing, they see the excerpt again so that they can check their description. Finally they read the description and get the other students in their group to guess which person they are referring to. (c) Students read a real estate agent's description of a house. They imagine that they have to sell their present house and write an advertisement describing the house and including a price. They pass their advertisements to another group who try to agree on which place sounds best for the price. (d) Students follow instructions and find a place on a map. Then they must write down directions to their own house on a party invitation to the other students in their class (remind them to include landmarks). (e) Students read a passage about customs in a foreign country and note any differences with their own culture. After that they brainstorm about a typical Japanese custom or ceremony, take notes and finally write about it to their penpal in a certain country. There is no end to the variety of classroom tasks that will exercise the students' communicative abilities.

Students will need to realize how English is patterned, but the lexical density of authentic text precludes an emphasis on textual patterns in a freshman composition course. One pattern, however, is evident even at the easiest levels of discourse. We try to avoid repetition in English texts by using pronouns, synonyms and superordinates. In a pre-task, students take an authentic text and underline all the words that refer to the same thing or person. In the follow-up task, the teacher removes the pronouns, synonyms and

superordinates from another authentic text and repeats the original word. The students' task is to restore the original text by getting the students to underline the repetitions and replace them with the missing words that are provided.

5) Finally, students will be introduced to a 4-stage writing process and will produce a short paper on a topic of their choice by the end of each semester. Before they begin work on the paper, they are given an example of an essay in which they have to identify the content and placement of the main idea, the introduction, the supporting points, and the conclusion. Then they begin the 4 stages of their paper: the idea, the outline, the rough draft, and the final draft. Their work must be submitted to the teacher for approval at each stage to ensure that the students give it enough thought and have chosen a topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow for the length of the paper. The rough draft will be the only stage where the teacher attempts a thorough grammatical correction. Up until this stage the student will be focused on what she is saying rather than on how she says it. Whether students have written a paper before or not, this process should help them and the teacher to spot problems as they come up, and it will prevent students from failing ; otherwise there is a temptation to write the perfect paper in a single go.

### **Assessing and Evaluation**

Skilbeck distinguishes between assessing the students and evaluating the syllabus. In the above syllabus, assessment of the students will be based on two aspects of their work, their diary and the 4-stages of their papers. The teacher's view of their in-classroom participation is also a factor, although because of class size it is necessarily subjective. The tasks done in the classroom go unread and are considered to be consciousness-raising techniques, so they fall outside the realm of assessment. The diary provides the teacher with a record of each student's thoughts and perseverance while the different stages of the paper provide a record of her conceptual and grammatical progress.

Evaluation of this syllabus is problematic considering that the syllabus is designed and carried out by one individual with no peer oversight. There are only two possible sources of input in a situation such as this : the students and the teacher. In order to get as well-balanced a view as possible from the former, the teacher should pass out a questionnaire at the end of the course with a statement of objectives in one column and a space for the students' opinions as to whether or not these objectives were attained in the other. Self-evaluation, on the other hand, will depend on the individual teacher's attitudes, but students' attitudes towards each kind of task and students' ease of completion could be ascertained by a separate questionnaire. Student and teacher workloads and students' progress are two other factors to be taken into account, although a valid measurement of the progress of one group of students in a certain teaching situation compared to that of another group in a different teaching situation would be extremely difficult.

I set out in this paper to apply Skilbeck's situational model originally designed for curriculum design to syllabus design. My reasons for doing so stemmed from the feeling that too theoretical or idealistic a treatment of syllabus design came dangerously close to ignoring the realities of the learners' situation. Skilbeck's model has served to bring out the complexities of the learners' situation in Japan with its different educational culture. This can only be ignored at the risk of misinterpreting the students' desires and capabilities, a risk that only the foolish would take. Whether my conclusions based on this model are justified or not, the model itself has allowed me to focus in a concrete way on the learner and her past, present and future environments as basis for syllabus development. In that sense, Skilbeck's situational model has been a success.

### NOTES

- 1) White, R V., **The ELT Curriculum** (Oxford, UK. Blackwell Publishers, reprinted 1993) p 40
- 2) **Ibid** , p.37.
- 3) **Ibid.**, p.38.
- 4) **Ibid** , pp 38-39
- 5) **Ibid.**, p 39.
- 6) Kirkwold, D , D Lomas, and S Yonesaka, "English Used in Foreign Multinational Companies in the Tokyo Region A Pilot Study," **Studies in Culture 4** (Hokkaido : Hokkai Gakuen University Faculty of the Humanities, 1995), p 156
- 7) White, R. V., **The ELT Curriculum** (Oxford, UK Blackwell Publishers, reprinted 1993) p 39.