การผสานแบบฝึกหัดเข้ากับเนื้อหาบทเรียน ในห้องเรียนภาษา

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอการทดลองสอนบทเรียน 1 ตอน โดยใช้ analytic syllabus เป็นเวลาหกชั่วโมง analytic syllabus เป็นหลักสูตรซึ่งผสานแบบฝึกหัดและเนื้อหาบทเรียนเข้าด้วยกัน ผู้วิจัยทดลองใช้หลักสูตรนี้กับรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวิชาการ (EAP course) ในมหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทย ผู้วิจัยอธิบายหลักการและเหตุผลทางด้านการศึกษาของการออกแบบการทดลองนี้ และสนับสนุนด้วยคำอธิบายและหลักการของแต่ละขั้นตอนในการทดลองสอน การพัฒนาบทเรียนนี้ผู้วิจัยยึดแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับการจัดหมวดหมู่ (categorization) รวมทั้งการจัดหมวดหมู่แมลงและการทำสำรวจการวิจัยเกี่ยวกับสไตล์การเรียนของนักศึกษา ผลการทดลองสอนชี้ชัดว่าแนวคิดนี้มีผลดีต่อการเรียนภาษาของนักศึกษา และจากบันทึกของนักศึกษาต่อการเรียนแบบนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงปฏิกิริยาเชิงบวกที่นักศึกษามีต่อแบบฝึกหัดและเนื้อหาของบทเรียน โดยพิจารณาจากปฏิสัมพันธ์ในเชิงบวกของนักศึกษาต่อบทเรียนทั้งด้านแบบฝึกหัดและเนื้อหาบทเรียน ซึ่งสอดคล้องกับงานวิจัยอื่นๆ ในลักษณะนี้

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Integrating Task and Content in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

This paper describes the piloting of a six-hour unit of an analytic syllabus which treats task and content as a unity. The situation is an EAP course at a Thai university. The educational rationale for the design of the unit is presented followed by a description of and rationale for each stage in the unit. The unit is organised around the concept of categorisation, and includes categorising insects and a research survey of university students' learning styles. The unit clearly exhibits the theoretical principles underlying effective language learning, and the students' reactions to the unit, collected from journals, were positive concerning both the tasks and the content.

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Since Wilkins [1] first made the distinction between analytic and synthetic syllabuses, interest in analytic syllabuses has grown at the expense of synthetic syllabuses. Analytic syllabuses treat language holistically, so that language is presented as a whole which learners can analyse for discrete points themselves. In other words, there are no explicit language foci in analytic syllabuses. Synthetic syllabuses, on the other hand, divide language into small units. A traditional grammar-based approach is an example of a synthetic syllabus, where the whole of English grammar is divided into separate grammar points and successive lessons focus nearly exclusively on these grammar points. The learners' task in a synthetic syllabus, then, is to synthesise the separate language items together to form a picture of the whole language.

Analytic syllabuses can be seen as a reaction against the behaviourism and Cartesian reductionism of synthetic syllabuses [2]. Analytic syllabuses, then, are more reflective of cognitive and constructivist theories of learning and of language viewed as discourse rather than as analysable sentences, and thus they have emerged from recent findings in educational psychology and linguistics. The growth of interest in analytic syllabuses at the expense of synthetic syllabuses is therefore perhaps unsurprising.

Analytic syllabuses

Analytic syllabus is a cover term which includes several different models. Long and Crookes identify three analytic approaches [3], namely, procedural, process and task-based syllabuses. To these, we should add project-based and content-based courses [4]. Let us look at each of these briefly.

- Procedural syllabuses derive from the Bangalore Project [5] where the syllabus was constructed around a series of problem-solving tasks. Sequencing in the syllabus was based on the amount of reasoning required to solve the task, and teacher feedback focused solely on meaning.
- Process syllabuses are associated with the work of Breen [6] and Candlin [7]. As with procedural syllabuses, process courses revolve around a series of problem-solving tasks. In contrast, however, process syllabuses place a heavy emphasis on procedural knowledge rather than declarative knowledge (i.e. how to learn, not what to learn), and the syllabus is constantly under negotiation with the learners.
- Task-based syllabuses view tasks as a necessary vehicle for presenting appropriate language to learners [3]. Tasks are selected according to the extent to which they reflect

the real-world tasks that learners will undertake, and, as with procedural and process syllabuses, the language needed to complete the task is not emphasised in task selection and sequencing.

Project-based syllabuses acknowledge the importance of theme-centred interaction in language learning [8]. Instead of breaking a course down into a series of tasks, a project-based course has one overall thematic goal which drives the course, and the tasks conducted in different lessons build towards that goal. Thus, in project-based syllabuses tasks are subordinate to content.

Content-based instruction places the greatest emphasis on the content through which earning takes place rather than the tasks [9, 10]. Within a theme-based model of content-based instruction, a course comprises several themes which are assumed to be of intrinsic interest to the learners and tasks are designed which facilitate the learning of these themes.

These five models suggest two main directions within analytic syllabus design. Emphasis can be placed either on tasks (procedural, process and task-based syllabuses) or on content (project-based and content-based approaches). Such a distinction is, however, invalid. A series of tasks without a coherent thematic progression would be disjointed, and a content-oriented approach without full consideration of the role of tasks could result in little learner engagement. Therefore, we must consider tasks and content as a unity [11]. Thus, in designing analytic syllabuses we should consider a combined task-and-content syllabus.

Large-scale units

To achieve a coherent task-and-content course, as we shall see, we shall have to focus on large-scale units (either tasks or units of content), perhaps similar to small-scale projects.

Looking first from the perspective of tasks, when taken to mean any classroom activity focused on meaning rather than form [12], tasks range in size from an isolated teacher question to project work. Thus, both Willis [13] and Rubdy [14] give small-scale activities such as information gap (e.g. Spot the Difference) as examples of tasks as well as larger-scale survey projects. Such a range of possible activities referred to as tasks causes problems both for understanding what is meant by task-based teaching and for integrating content and tasks. If we were to use small-scale tasks, the problem of achieving a coherent integration of task and content appears insurmountable. Thematic linking of, say, information gap tasks could result either in a random jumping around within a topic or in excessive repetition of certain themes. To avoid such problems, larger-scale tasks which provide for deeper topic processing should be used.

Conversely, from the perspective of content, if we are aiming for thematic coherence, breaking an overall theme up into many small topics carries the danger of producing an incoherent whole. Dividing the overall theme as few times as possible is more likely to result in coherent content. So, whether we look at course coherence from the perspective of task or from that of content, large-scale units need to be used.

How people learn languages

So far we have examined the forms of analytic syllabus available, and seen that ideally such syllabuses should be based around large-scale units comprising a unity of content and topic. As important as, if not more important than, the type of syllabus used are considerations of how languages are learnt. Notwithstanding several decades of research into language learning, how people learn languages is still controversial. Nevertheless, several necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) factors which lead to successful language learning have been identified.

The first factor is exposure to the language. Obviously, without any exposure to English, it would be impossible to learn the language. Furthermore, such exposure should not be restricted to certain discrete language points since we cannot predict what points learners will acquire [13]. Also, the exposure should be experiential [15] in that it should involve the learners in doing things and manipulating language to achieve non-pedagogic goals [16]. Finally, the exposure should focus on meaning, since memories laid down in connection to meaning are longer-lasting and more retrievable in real- world situations [17].

Exposure, although a necessary prerequisite, is not by itself sufficient for language learning. Learners must attend to the exposure, become engaged with it, and activate relevant cognitive structures to deal with it [11]. Through such attention, engagement and activation, exposure can become intake.

For intake to lead to proficiency, practice is also needed. Such practice, however, should not be mechanical, but should be meaningful [18] and so should involve manipulation of holistic language to achieve purposeful goals.

Lastly, learning is more efficient if learners are aware of how and why they are learning [19]. Learning awareness facilitates engagement and activation of cognitive structures, and enables learners to get the most from meaningful practice.

So how do these factors fit in with the analytic syllabus proposed? An analytic task-and-content syllabus provides holistic exposure to language focusing on meaning. Learners are required

to manipulate language to complete tasks. With intrinsically motivating content, learners are more likely to become engaged with the content, and organisation around large-scale units gives more opportunities for meaningful practice. Finally, as we shall see, learning awareness can be integrated into the syllabus. It would therefore appear that a task-and-content syllabus should facilitate the acquisition of language.

Implementing a task-and-content syllabus

The situation

The approach described above should be applicable in a wide variety of situations. In this paper, however, I will describe the implementation of a task-and-content syllabus in an English for Academic Purposes context.

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi is a Thai university with undergraduate programmes primarily in science and engineering. All undergraduate students are required to take at least two sixty-hour English courses, the first of which is a general English for Science and Technology (EST) course and the second of which focuses on a specific skill. The general EST course is adapted from Interface [20] which is organised around discrete discourse functions.

Dissatisfaction with this situation has led the Faculty of Liberal Arts, which provides the English support courses, to propose a completely revised curriculum. The proposed curriculum contains two preparatory EST courses for which students will undergo placement, followed by a course-length project [2 1] and finally a content-based adjunct course [9]. In this paper, I will focus on how a task-and-content syllabus can be implemented in the three preparatory EST courses. Instead of giving a list of syllabus content, I will describe the piloting of one specific unit lasting six hours as this allows a clearer picture of the practice of task-and-content syllabuses to be formed. The piloting was conducted with a class of 18 second-year Computer Engineering students.

Rationale behind the unit

As we have seen, ideally in analytic syllabuses task and content should be considered as a unity. There are problems with such a conception however. Tasks such as interviews do not determine the content of the task, and content such as The Big Bang [2 2] or demography [2 3] does not immediately suggest the tasks to be used. One way of overcoming this is to use philosophical categories of content which underpin science. In the unit described in this paper, then, both the task and content are categorisation. Categorising as a task can raise awareness [24] and categorising as content has many implications for science and engineering.

Having chosen the overall unit of task/content, we must look at how it can be exploited. Initially the concept of categorisation must be introduced in an intrinsically motivating way that can stimulate the students' curiosity [2 5]. The unit should also provide opportunities for raising students' awareness of both language and learning. Materials used should be authentic to the greatest possible extent and should be used in authentic ways to prepare the students for language use in the real world. Quality and quantity of exposure and the opportunities for meaningful practice should be maxirnised. Finally, some decisions about learning and content should involve the students to engage their attention and activate existing cognitive structures. Such a list of requirements for unit design may seem a tall order, but I hope to show that the piloted unit described below meets all of these requirements.

Description of the unit

The description which follows is broken down into stages. For each stage, there is a description followed by a rationale for the stage.

Stage 1 Introducing categorisation: Insects

Prior to the first two-hour lesson of the unit, students were asked to bring a selection of insects, preferably alive, to the lesson. In addition, the teacher also brought a variety of insect eggs and pupae. The students were not told the purpose of bringing the insects, so that at the start of the lesson their curiosity was high. Students were asked to form groups and pool their insects. They were then asked to think of ways of categorising the insects which could apply to the insect throughout its whole life cycle. After a period of brainstorming, discussion and evaluation of ideas in groups, the students' ideas were discussed in plenary, and finally the concepts of dichotomies and continua were introduced and students' ways of categorising insects were matched against these concepts.

This initial categorisation task should be intrinsically motivating as students' curiosity levels were high. Their task engagement while categorising in groups suggests this to be true. The task of categorising insects is actually quite challenging, since immediately apparent bases for categorisation (e.g. can fly/cannot fly) do not generally apply throughout the whole life cycle of insects. The task therefore requires high levels of cognitive processing and especially the application of critical thinking skills to evaluate the ways of categorising insects which are generated. In the pilot lesson, valid categories generated by the students included living in groups/living alone and 3-stage life cycle/4-stage life cycle. The final distinction between dichotomies and continua is particularly important in the philosophy of science [26] and, as we shall see in the next stage, in how English operates.

Stage 2 Categorising pairs of adjectives

Having introduced the distinction between dichotomies and continua, the next stage was to link these concepts to English. Using male-female and big-small as initial examples, the idea that pairs of opposite adjectives could be represented by either dichotomies or continua was presented. Then students had to decide whether each pair in a list of 23 pairs of opposites was a dichotomy or a continuum. The semantic and syntactic implications of this distinction were then presented, namely, opposites as dichotomies (but not continua) can use the form either X or Y, and opposites as continua (but not dichotomies) can take the comparative and the superlative, can be preceded by How (though one of the pair is marked in this usage), can be preceded by very, and may be just two of a range of adjectives along a continuum. Students were then asked to use their existing knowledge to fill in as many adjectives as possible on continua for which the core adjectives were given (e.g. given big-small, students could produce tiny and huge).

This stage was clearly related to language, but the main focus was still categorisation rather than the discrete language point of opposite adjectives. However, by approaching language through a task such as categorisation, the students' metacognitive knowledge of language, or language awareness [24,27], should be raised and language could be perceived as an object of interest. The task of categorisation again required high levels of cognitive processing, since some pairs of opposites could be both gradable (i.e. continua) and ungradable (i.e. dichotomies) [28]. For example, *true-false* are ungradable antonyms from the perspective of binary logic, but gradable from the perspective of fuzzy logic (something particularly pertinent to computing students). The final highlighting of the language implications of the gradable-ungradable distinction, it was hoped, would again raise students' awareness.

Stage 3 Categorising the students

At the start of the second two-hour lesson, students were asked to think of categories which could be used to categorise themselves (elicited categories included *male-female* and an age continuum) and to organise themselves into these categories as a warmer. They were then asked to write down three words which described their personality and to group themselves based on these words. An authentic personality questionnaire based on Neuro-Linguistic Programming [2 9] and taken from a popular magazine was then distributed. Students completed the questionnaire, identified their 'personality type' and compared the results to the groupings based on elicited personality words.

This stage brought the concepts of categorisation closer to the students themselves and, thus, involved them more closely with the content of the unit, hopefully leading to higher levels of engagement. In addition, the stage aims to activate relevant cognitive structures for the ensuing investigation of learning styles (see below).

Stage 4 Generating a questionnaire

An alternative way of categorising students, namely, categorisation based on learning style, was introduced, and the different ways in which the students learnt were elicited. Students were then told that, to help the Faculty of Liberal Arts, they would conduct a survey of students from different faculties at the university. The survey would be conducted by interviewing students in English to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was generated by the students and they were assigned different faculties whose students they would interview. The work was to be conducted in groups of three.

The introduction to learning styles and the questionnaire generation are primarily preparatory for the large-scale survey task which follows. Two factors concerning this preparation, however, should have positive effects on the students' learning. First, the topic of the survey can be related to the students' previous learning experience, and it also encourages thinking about learning, thus raising learning awareness. Second, the content of the questionnaire was constructed primarily by the students, increasing their involvement and their engagement with its future application, since they are the 'owners' of the questionnaire.

Stage 5 Conducting the survey

As homework, before the next lesson, the students in groups had to interview at least ten students from their assigned faculties. From the interviewees' responses, the questionnaires could be completed. The interviews were also recorded. Conducting such interviews increases the quantity of the students' exposure to spoken English, although the quality of exposure was dependent on the interviewees' language competence. Even with low-competence interviewees, however, the exposure could still prove beneficial since students had to provide paraphrases and explain meanings to facilitate interviewees' comprehension.

Stage 6 Peer evaluation of interviews

After discussing problems and interesting points which arose from the interviews, various criteria regarding the effectiveness of interviews were presented. These included how to open and close interviews, ways of asking questions, using follow-up questions, and helping interviewees with language problems. Groups then swapped recordings of their interviews, listened to the other group's tape and evaluated the interviews based on the presented criteria. An inter-group peer feedback session followed.

If we are to help students become effective English users in the real world, they must be able to rely on themselves and make their own valid judgments about language use [30]. Rather than relying on the teacher to give feedback, students should be able to give feedback themselves. Peer

evaluation is a necessary step in this direction. Such evaluation, however, often lacks direction. To be effective, peer evaluation must be data-driven [31] - in this case, the data comes from the recordings - and should revolve around criteria which give support for making valid judgments.

Stage 7 Data interpretation and presentation

The questionnaire which the students had generated was a smaller version of the questionnaire [32] had used in his large-scale learning style survey of adult learners in Australia. Since many of the questions on the students' questionnaire matched questions on Willing's questionnaire, they could be reliably used to identify interviewees' learning style. By calculating the means for the questions which matched questions Willing had identified as significant learning style indicators, the predominant learning style of the students from each faculty in the university could be calculated. By regrouping the students, these means were compared to identify similarities and differences in the ways students from different faculties learn English. The students in their new groupings were then asked to prepare and give a two-minute oral presentation of the findings.

This stage exhibits the characteristics of the later stages of conducting research. In fact, the students' work here should be considered true research, since the data collected were previously unknown and, once collated and interpreted, provided findings which were applicable and useful. The students, then, were engaged in experiential learning concerning the conducting of research. High levels of cognitive processing were required in deciding how to present the findings (e.g. should the comparison be based primarily on faculty or on identified learning style? what type of graph would best illustrate the data?). The actual presentation, although short, provided meaningful practice in presentation skills, part of the meaningfulness deriving from the fact that some lecturers in the Faculty of Liberal Arts listened to the presentations. After the presentations, there was a discussion concerning how to explain certain salient results. For example, interviewees from the School of Bioresources had a predominantly authority-oriented learning style in contrast to interviewees from other faculties who were largely communicative or concrete. The Bioresources interviewees were postgraduates whereas most other interviewees were undergraduate. Was the unique learning style of the Bioresources interviewees related to their learning of Bioresources or to the fact that they were postgraduates? This spontaneous discussion again required the students to use high levels of reasoning and critical thinking skills.

Stage 8 Process evaluation

Although constrained by time, a brief process evaluation session where the students reflected on how they had learnt through the unit [8] was held. Students were also asked to write journals concerning their learning experiences in the unit to aid reflection on and processing of their learning. These journals could also be used by the researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of the unit.

Summary of the unit

I hope that, in the description above, I have shown how a task-and-content unit may enhance students' learning. To recap, learners receive a large amount of high quality exposure to English throughout the unit both inside and outside the classroom. This English is not predetermined, has no prespecified language points and is encountered in authentic ways (e.g. Stage 3). Learners become involved with the intrinsically motivating tasks and content (e.g. Stages 1, 3, 4), and substantial opportunities for meaningful practice are provided (e.g. Stages 5, 7). In addition, several of the stages (e.g. Stages 1, 2, 6, 7) require high levels of cognitive processing, especially with regard to critical thinking skills, and there are many points at which students' language and learning awareness is raised (e.g. Stages 2, 4, 8). Lastly, the unit also encourages students to become more autonomous (e.g. Stage 6).

Students' reactions

Although the argument above may seem persuasive, the true mettle of any educational innovation is how it affects students' learning. Since the unit described encompasses only 6 contact hours, little overall improvement in language competence can be expected. To evaluate the effects of the unit on students' learning, then, we must turn to more qualitative data in the form of students' post-unit journals. In addition to helping the students reflect on their learning, such journals can also provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of teaching [3 3]. The journals could be written in either Thai or English.

Four main themes emerge from the students' journals which are relevant to evaluating the unit. Firstly, the overall use of experiential tasks was highlighted. For example:

"วิธีการสอนของอาจารย์มีวิธีการที่แปลก มีกิจกรรมให้ทำ ไม่ใช่สอนแต่ในแผ่นกระดาษ"

(The teacher's teaching method is a strange method, where there are tasks/activities, not just teaching from handouts)

and

"ได้ความประทับใจในการทำกิจกรรม"

(I was impressed with the tasks/activities used)

In addition, some students singled out specific tasks as being particularly valuable:

"การให้ไปทำแบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นกิจกรรมที่ดี"

(The work concerning making a questionnaire about learning English was a good task/ activity)

However, some students felt that the time devoted to some group tasks was too long. Nevertheless, the students' reactions to a task-based as opposed to handout-based teaching method were overwhelmingly positive.

A second theme emerging from the journals concerns the use of categorisation as content. A sample journal extract is:

"การให้จับแมลงมาแยกประเภท เพื่อเป็นการเริ่มต้นการเรียนเกี่ยวกับระดับของคำที่มีความหมายตรงข้ามกัน เป็นการสอนที่ดี แต่น่าสงสารแมลงบางตัวที่จับมาแล้วต้องตายไปก่อนที่จะถึงเวลาปล่อย"

(The work of collecting and categorising insects as an introduction to learning about kinds of oppositeness of words is good teaching, but I felt sorry for the collected insects which died before it was time to free them)

Despite the hardship to the insects, the content of categorisation appears effective.

Thirdly, some stages, especially conducting the survey, raised students' learning awareness.

"แบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษทำให้เห็นความแตกต่างในเรื่องของภาษาในคณะต่างๆ"

(The questionnaire about learning English made me see the differences in language between the different faculties)

Finally, several students explicitly stated that the openness of discussions prompted critical thinking. For example,

"The discussion about opinions and ideas about insects make me think a lot. I think about how to classify insects the way that is best."

From the students' journals, then, factors which were identified earlier as being important were manifested in the unit. Both tasks and content were appreciated by the students; their learning awareness was raised; and thinking skills were promoted.

Summary

In this paper I have described the pilotting of a unit of a broadly-based analytic syllabus combining task and content. Although the findings concerning this pilotting are not rigorous or widely generalisable, they do suggest that a task-and-content syllabus could prove effective. By providing non-discrete, experiential exposure to English which engages the students, leads to meaningful practice and raises their learning awareness, a task-and-content syllabus warrants serious consideration as an effective alternative to more traditional syllabuses. I hope that other language teachers will consider the points made here seriously and that their students may be given the opportunity to benefit from a task-and-content syllabus.

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