

*Empowering and Engaging the ESL Learners in the Task-Based ESL Curriculum
Evaluation*

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Abstract

The research delved into evaluation as central to curriculum planning, designing, and implementation in the teacher-initiated negotiated curriculum. What seemed to be a reverse approach in the process was explored in a quantitative-qualitative approach in data collection. Three (3) ESL classes in the tertiary level participated in the study utilizing a survey questionnaire and focus groups for analysis and interpretation of obtained results. Given the empowered learners' weekly evaluation of class activities and tasks, significant results produced an enhanced ESL curriculum open to ongoing assessment and evaluation.

Keywords: negotiated curriculum, learner empowerment, task-based curriculum evaluation

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Introduction

Where relevant, meaningful, and productive instruction is facilitated, there is learning. Old school of thought had the teacher solely credited for this. Paradigm shifts in education, however, debunk the misconception, acknowledging that a learner-centred yields far better and more viable results than the teacher-dominated instruction.

In today's outcomes-based education for the 21st century learners, the same philosophy is advocated with the teacher and students' co-production in the setting of learning objectives, tasks, activities, and socially-constructed events inside the classroom. The global-oriented teacher adheres to the belief that getting the learners engaged in the collaborative process creates genuine and enhanced learning. Learner empowerment allows that 'voice' to get involved in all the activities that take place in and outside the classroom that pertain to delving into uncharted paths of discovering and learning and mastering one's way through it. Each and every learner is consulted from lesson planning to lesson evaluation. In concrete macroscopic pedagogical terms, that would be from curriculum planning, curriculum designing, curriculum implementation, curriculum assessment to curriculum evaluation.

In this negotiated curriculum, too, while a teacher has a certain amount of power in the classroom, learners clearly influence the pace and direction of the on-going interaction (Allwright, 1984). Teacher-leadership does not diminish for teacher support is still one of the scaffolds (Vygostky, 1983) needed to assist the learners in the process. The learners, on the other hand, reciprocate through peripheral participation in everything set in the educational programme, the most crucial of which is evaluation.

It is in evaluation that collaborative-inquiry reaches its penultimate, when the participants, teacher and students, realistically reflect on what may have transpired in a learning session that culminated in real learning. Rooted in first-hand experiences, students' reflections empower them to be insightful on their own learning process (Greene, 1978). An interactive decision-making initiated by the teacher once feedback is taken then becomes the core of possible revisions in the previous or existing or the basis before adopting a new programme.

Since the heart of an implemented curriculum is the conduct of series of tasks and activities in learning sessions, a task-based curriculum evaluation is certain to reveal significant feedback crucial to the evaluators. In second language learning (LL₂), results would indeed be vital to the ESL teacher aware that first language interference has for years been a struggle to the equally-challenged ESL learners.

Veered to this direction, the research focused on the active collaboration between the teacher and students empowered and engaged in a teacher-designed task-based curriculum evaluation. Meant to serve as a guide to maximize second language learning in successive sessions, it lends itself likewise to a serious quantitative-qualitative approach to continuously finding ways to improve the effectiveness of a second language programme. With teacher-leadership and learner empowerment in full active force, the expected main participants are the teacher and the learners.

Objectives of the Study

The study is aimed to answer the following:

General Problem:

What are the perceptions and preferences of ESL learners on tasks given in language learning sessions?

Sub-Problems:

How do ESL learners rate teacher-given tasks in a language class?

How do ESL learners rank teacher-given tasks in a language class?

Significance of the Study

The research undertaking, in pursuit of optimizing the results of ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching-learning in a typical classroom, recognizes that learner interaction with the teacher through the years has been limited to class discussions and participation in teacher-designed students' tasks and activities. The concept of the learner-centred instruction already in practice, with the teacher as the facilitator, it seems, is short yet of the ideal which the study attempted to prove.

The negotiated curriculum which transcends the familiar understanding of learner-centeredness is a step further to eliciting simply the involvement of the learners in curriculum implementation of said classroom events. The study, therefore, engaged the selected research participants in an after-session evaluation of the tasks asked of them to perform. In an interactive decision-making, through feedback forms (pen and paper), validated by focussed-group discussions, each participant had the equal chance to share his perceptions about the subject, and to rate and rank every task he was asked to do. In part, this is learner empowerment.

In such collaborative sharing, all learners are treated as individually unique; thus explains the dynamic and unpredictable the nature of the typical classroom. Needs, desires, and wants vary which are to be accounted for in the holistic view of curriculum management. In addition, the realization that the ESL millennium learners are digital learners, quite advanced in access to information with their sophisticated gadgets and technological knowhow, somehow makes it more compelling to truly determine their personal views on learning. With different personal experiences or "baggage" which they bring to the classroom (Gabbrielli, 2012), to create a stimulating learning environment may be overwhelming to an ESL teacher schooled in a different period. To empower and engage them as learners will foster trust in mutual concern to guarantee tangible and intangible fruits of education.

Literature Review

Anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), stressing the psychological and social planes as bases for a child's cultural development, the research correlated second language learning to the social activity in which knowledge is constructed by the learner, together with his constant exposure to it.

With a humanistic view of students (Roger, 1974), and aware that language learning is a social process and personalized to be able to find meaning in it (Poplin & Sato, Henison, 2006), a committed ESL teacher builds a positive, mutual learning relationship, engaging the learners in interactive classes. Students and teachers are partners then in the teaching-learning relationship. Eventually, the teacher just serves as a scaffold (Vygotsky, 1983) with the learners owning and managing their own learning (Krashen, 1981, 1985).

In an ESL curriculum, the framework for its communicative feature is a set of learning opportunities set in tasks (Crabbe, 2007). Skehan (1998) contended that what matters in task-based approaches is the way meaning is brought into prominence by the emphasis on goals and activities. The tasks need outcomes to motivate learners into participation. Learning opportunities are the means available to learners at all times, self-directed and managed to be considered as products of learning. While tasks are procedural, learning opportunities are potential.

A task-based evaluation must have one for its intentions the greater probability that the potential have become real learning opportunities. The evaluators' responses to questions are an invaluable feedback for reflection, further inquiry, decision-making, and action. Identified phenomena in the here-and-now (Maley, 1994) while lessons are in progress must be considered in the formulation of items in the evaluation. Richards & Lockhart (1994) included in their own list questions on clarity of instructions in the accomplishment of tasks, relevance and level of difficulty of the tasks, time constraints, suitability of materials used, getting and sustaining the students' attention, acquisition of information, acquired language to perform the tasks, use and mastery of the language in order, and fun and enjoyment in doing the tasks.

The gap between the teacher and the learners narrows in the equal dialogue as teacher and learners evaluate the course together (Stewart, 2007). Teacher-students and students-students interactions are negotiated (Morgan & Wendy, 1997). With solidarity in place of teacher's full authority, equality in place of hierarchy, intimacy in place of social distance between teacher and students (Wood & Kroger, 2000), the language of power relations is in its rightful place. As teacher-student talk progresses, there is interaction with teacher's guidance on students' learning (Barnes et al., 1969, 1976; Christie et al., 1991). This discourse on interaction is jointly constructed by the teacher and students as contributors (Alderson & Beretta, ed., 1992).

Methodology

The quantitative-qualitative method was employed to achieve the objectives of the study. The researcher wanted to be certain that statistical results be supported by forming focus groups after ratings and rankings had come in.

Three (3) ESL classes in the tertiary level from three (3) colleges participated in the study. ENGN 11A (Study and Thinking Skills), a reading class, comprising Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Arts major students from the College of Arts and Sciences; ENGN 12A (Writing in the Discipline), a writing class, comprising Hotel and Restaurant Administration major students from the College of International Travel and Hotel Management; and ENGL 13A (Speech Communication), a speech class,

comprising International Trade and Diplomacy students from the College of International Relations.

Session dates for evaluation for each class were based on assigned schedules with a varied number of student evaluators dependent on the attendance on the said days. Evaluation came in the Feedback Form using the Likert Scale of Rating in two parts. Part I concentrated on Perceptions of Students on English as a Subject. Part II covered the Assessment and Evaluation of Given Tasks in Class, with ratings and rankings for data interpretation. In the three classes, questions were standardized for Part I. In Part II, slight deviations were made to conform to the tasks given in each class, unique in the sense that these were based on the content or coverage of the lessons in each class.

Copies of the Feedback Form were distributed immediately after each session by class monitors to the respondents for completion within a ten-minute period, and collected by the same class beadles. Instructions as to honesty in filling out the form and guarantee of confidentiality of answers were stated beforehand to ensure a high degree of validity. Demographic profile requested was limited to course, year and section of the respondent, English subject taken, and date of evaluation.

ENGN 11A turned to be the only class among the three (3) classes available for the focus group session with the researcher as the facilitator. Validation of the statistical results and answers to open-ended questions missed in the Feedback Form were discussed. Tackled, in particular, were tasks that could have increased and enhanced learning and motivated students to participate more.

Presentation and Analysis of Results and Findings

Getting the grand mean scores and using the standard deviation for statistical interpretations of results, Part I of the study showed the following:

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Engl11	4.37	0684
Engl 12A	4.06	0.814
Engl 13A	4.89	0.315
Grand Mean	4.44	

Table 1: Perception of the ESL Learners of English

Problem 1: What is the perception of the ESL learners on English as a subject?

Likert Scale

- 4.20 – 5.00 Very Highly Perceived
- 3.40 – 4.19 Highly
- 2.60 – 3.39 Moderately
- 1.80 – 2.59 Fairly
- 1.00 – 1.79 Not

The overall perception of the ESL learners on English as a subject is described as very highly perceived by the three (3) groups of learners as evident by the grand mean of 4.44. The English 13A group’s perception on English as a subject is the most diverse compared to the other two (2) groups of learners as indicated in the group’s standard deviation and mean: 0.315 and 4.89 respectively.

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Engl11	4.00	0.577
Engl 12A	3.84	0.688
Engl 13A	4.54	0.508
Grand Mean	4.25	

Table 2. Classroom as a Venue for Language Learning

Likert Scale

- 4.20 – 5.00 Very Highly Conducive
- 3.40 – 4.19 Highly
- 2.60 – 3.39 Moderately
- 1.80 – 2.59 Fairly
- 1.00 – 1.79 Not

With a grand mean of 4.25, the classroom is very highly conducive to learning, with the ENGL 13A group giving the highest rating among the three.

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Engl11	4.37	0.597
Engl 12A	3.97	0.547
Engl 13A	4.54	0.576
Grand Mean	4.29	

Table 3

Problem 3: How is the content viewed for the topics covered during the period?

Likert Scale

- 4.20 – 5.00 Very Highly Suitable
- 3.40 – 4.19 Highly
- 2.60 – 3.39 Moderately
- 1.80 – 2.59 Fairly
- 1.00 – 1.79 Not

The content is viewed very highly suitable and appropriate for the topics covered during the period as indicated with the grand mean of 4.29. English 13A learners gave the highest scale of 4.54 while the English 12A learners gave the lowest scale of 3.97.

	ENGN 11A	ENGN 12A	ENGL 13A
LCD	1	2	1
WHITE BOARD	2	3	2
TEXTBOOK	3	1	3

Table 4

Problem 4: In what order of preference do the learning materials used in the sessions come?

Significant differences were evident in the use of textbook by the three groups as described in the p – value ($0.000 < 0.05$). This indicates that the use of textbook may or may not improve the insights, and comprehension of the three groups about the topics covered. The use of the white board and LCD do not show significant differences between the groups.

	ENGN 11A	ENGN 12A	ENGL13A
DYAD		2	
ROLE-PLAYING	1	1	2
INDIVIDUAL SHARING	2	3	
GAMES			1
PPT	3		3

Table 5

Problem 5: In what order of preference do students' tasks in the session come?

	ENGN 11A	ENGN 12A	ENGL 13A
PERSONAL SHARING	1	1	2
PROCESSING CLASS TASKS	2		
LECTURE	3	3	1
INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION		2	3

Table 6

Problem 6: In what order of preference do the teacher's tasks come?

Among the four teachers' tasks, the interactive class discussions (p – value: 0.002) and personal sharing of experiences (p – value: 0.000) confirmed significant differences in the median achievements of the learners.

Problem 7: How do the students evaluate their learning in and out of the classroom?

Evaluation of the learning inside and outside the classroom was outstanding with a grand mean score of 4.30 – inside the classroom and 4.26 - learning outside the classroom. Learners truly understood the topics covered during the sessions which they properly applied outside the classroom.

Part II of the study covered the rating and ranking of the tasks by the evaluators in the three classes, the results of which are the following:

Problem 1: How agreeable to the students were the tasks and activities given in class? For English 11A, with an average scale of 4.27 and a highly agreeable rating, the tasks and activities were appropriate to assess the learning facilitated to the ESL learners. Tasks and activities found significant in the evaluation for Session 1 were 'The Paradox' for the springboard before the lesson proper, paired sharing with visual interpretation for an output, class discussion of "Bangkok"; Session 2 with group analysis of the reading selection; and for Session 3, drills and class processing of the group activity. Tasks and activities matched the learners' styles in acquiring knowledge and skills in English.

For the English 12A, Session 2 registered the highest scale of 4.05 and Session 1 the least scale with 3.55 with an average scale of 3.87 for the three sessions. Tasks and activities governed were therefore suitable to measure what is learned in the classroom. Session 1 had a review of past lesson, powerpoint presentation, and group contest for the tasks. Session 2 had processing results of the group contest, thesis statement formulation for a group output and a review of past lesson as tasks in the

order of ranking. Session 3 had review of past lesson, powerpoint presentation, class discussion, video clip of an interview and a quiz for the students to attend to.

The English 13A class rated Session 2 as very highly agreeable with 4.78 for the mean; Session 3 as very highly agreeable with 4.5 as the mean; and Session 1 as highly agreeable with 4.10 as a mean. The overall average of 4.46 with a descriptive equivalent of very highly agreeable was registered. Session 1 had the Alphabet Song for the springboard for the main lesson, review of vowel sounds, lecture discussion, drills, and oral interpretation of a poem for the tasks. Session 2 was spent for review of vowel sounds, tongue twisters for the group activity, and processing of the group activity. Session 3 had the students' review of consonant sounds, and composing of riddles for the group activity.

Conclusion

What obviously surfaced in the analyses of results appeared in every class evaluation of tasks given is the significance of the class composition taking the three English subjects. Perceptions, ratings, and rankings varied, dependent on the class profile of the student evaluators. Reflections and insights shared during the focus group discussion with the ENGL 11A volunteer members justified the statistical results.

ENGL 11A, the reading class whose members are multimedia major students appreciated and suggested more drawings with posters for an output, comics-making, games, film watching, and role-playing to be incorporated in the planned tasks for future sessions.

ENGL 12A, the writing class, comprising hotel and restaurant administration major students expressed the desire for PREZI in addition to powerpoint presentations, and teacher's guidance in questions addressed to the class for their recommendations.

ENGL 13A, the speech class, consisting of international trade and diplomacy major students wanted more of group activities for application of acquired knowledge and a longer period for the conduct of sessions.

In retrospect, empowering and engaging the ESL learners in the task-based curriculum evaluation did play a major role in actualizing the negotiated curriculum which calls for interactive and collaborative relations between the teacher and the students. The teacher-researcher realized which tasks and activities led to subject appreciation and task appreciation of the students. Perceptions, ratings, and rankings of tasks and activities produced significant results for the teacher and students to continuously keep the communication lines open for enhanced, meaningful, relevant, and productive learning.

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