# Principled decisions: Considerations in EFL course design for Japanese university students

原理に基づいた決断：日本の大学生対象EFLコース設計に関する考察

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大学生EFL学習者対象に新しいコースをデザインするとき、教師にはさまざまな教育的選択が委ねられる。なかでもシラバスと評価方法に関する考察は特に重要だと言える。そこで、本研究では、原理・理論に基づいたコースの開発・実施後に、コース設計時に教師が下した教育的決断を学習者も有益だと認識したか検証するため学習者の評価を調査した。その結果、学生は（1）成果・過程混成シラバスの構成要素である計画性と反復性が特に有益だと認識していたこと、(2) 形成的評価、総括的評価の両者の混成評価を好んでいることが分かった。本研究で明らかになったことは、制限はあるものの、今後同様にコース開発に関わるEFL教師の意思決定過程に役立つものと考える。

## 1. Introduction

Designing a course for EFL learners is a challenging endeavour. Teachers are faced with several important choices, not least the responsibility of whether the decisions they make both maximize and facilitate learner potential.

Based on a learner group's unique set of needs, the specific goals of any given course naturally provide a useful starting point for its design (Nunan, 1996). During the planning stage, therefore, several factors need to be taken into consideration in order to assist such goals being successfully met. Two common areas of concern in relation to this are: (1) the syllabus; and (2) the assessment methods employed. Both of these influence not only the way in which learners engage with the course, but also the course's final outcome in terms of tangible progress that might be made in acquiring and communicating effectively in the target language (*ibid.*). These factors may further influence whether learners perceive themselves to have benefitted from a course both throughout its duration and at its conclusion, ultimately determining whether the perception of a meaningful learning experience has taken place (Wiersema,

2006). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to outline some of these considerations on the basis of informed pedagogical decisions, and to establish whether they are supported by data from detailed learner feedback.

## 2．Course considerations

### 2.1 *Syllabus considerations*

The general trend in language teaching since the 1970s has reflected a move away from linguistically-oriented syllabi towards a more communicative approach. Whereas previously, syllabi "tended to focus on the things that learners should know or be able to do as a result of instruction"—thus being "product-orientated"—the prevailing trend now generally favours syllabi which stress the importance of "the process through which … outcomes are to be brought about"—thus being "process-orientated" (Nunan, 1988, p. 14). Such syllabi are sometimes categorized as either "Type A", with emphasis being placed on *what* is to be learnt, or "Type B" on *how* it is to be learnt (White, 1988, p. 44).

An early interpretation of the communicative approach to syllabus design was proposed by Munby (1978), in which a set of criteria based on preferred learning style and background enabled a nine-pronged needs analysis to be carried out so that the basis for a syllabus could be provided. However, this has been criticized for being too mechanistic and limited in terms of which criteria constitute a valid needs analysis (e.g. García-Mayo, 2000). As a result, the subsequent shift has been more towards learner-centred approaches with prominence placed on autonomy (e.g. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Scharle & Szabo, 2000). This can be seen with the development of task-based learning (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Ellis, 2003), as with syllabi that evolve in order to accommodate changing learner needs or even those that are learner-negotiated (e.g. Nation & Macalister, 2010).

While process-orientated syllabi arguably offer a more "naturalistic" approach to language learning, they have not been without criticism. For example, tasks in themselves may be difficult to define, syllabi may result in over-reliance on eclecticism, and a lack of focus on accuracy may lead to cross-linguistic fossilization (Hadley, 1998). Therefore, it is perhaps also important to neither overlook nor discredit the potential benefits of product-orientated syllabi.

Process-driven syllabi consist largely of "analytical" approaches and incorporate a procedural task-based focus, whereas breaking down a language into discrete units in order to be reconstructed is considered more of a "synthetic" approach (Wilkins, 1976). It is this synthetic approach which provides the backbone for product-orientated syllabi (Willis, 1990). Over time

this has evolved from the grammatical-lexical and situational approaches into the functional-notional approach. This latter approach requires learners to engage in communication while paying particular attention to the grammatical features they naturally necessitate, such as those used when making polite requests or suggestions. Thus, synthetic and analytical approaches need not be viewed as mutually exclusive, and, for this reason, Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983, p. 235) claimed functional-notionalism to possess "tremendous merit".

A logical option, therefore, would be to draw from elements of both product- and process-based approaches. Indeed, as van der Welt (1990, p. 77) pointed out:

> *There is as yet no theoretically pure syllabus, as both product and process sylla-buses can be criticized on theoretical as well as practical grounds. A theory-driven syllabus, however, remains an essential requirement, as language teaching cannot take place without a conceptual framework which gives effective direction to the enterprise. The product-process distinction is therefore best regarded as a continuum on which any syllabus can be placed, as it is likely to contain both product and process elements in practice.*

An attempt to balance both product and process elements within a theory-driven syllabus is neatly captured in Nation's (2007) "four strands" approach:

(1) Meaning-focused input (through listening and reading)

(2) Meaning-focused output (through speaking and writing)

(3) Language-focused learning (formal instruction of grammar and vocabulary)

(4) Fluency development (in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing)

Nation (2013, p. 10) argues that language learning does not occur as a result of teaching *per se*, but rather as a result of having to *use* the language. For this reason, teachers should not make the common mistake of overemphasizing the third strand (i.e. largely product-driven), but instead facilitate learners to acquire skills that enable them to use the language independently, even when focus on form is required (*ibid.*). Thus, all four strands should be given equal attention when designing and implementing a course. Herein lies a logical argument for both product and process components to be included in a syllabus.

Once such a principled framework for a syllabus has been established, further factors still need to be addressed. These factors could include, among others, the selection of content and

the way it might be best organized (Taba, 1962). The organization of content also requires principled decisions to be made, and one way of doing so is through incorporating Bloom's taxonomy.

Bloom *et al.* (1956) devised a classification system of learning objectives that helps facilitate learners to progress systematically through a series of skills needed to develop critical thinking. Later revised in 2001 in response to certain criticisms, Bloom redefined the taxonomy from its original version into a new set of classifications, which progress in a series of logical steps from remembering and understanding, to applying and analyzing, and finally from evaluating to creating (Krathwohl, 2002). In addition to the development of critical thinking skills, this systematic progression is particularly helpful when considering the cognitive demand that might be placed on learners during the second language acquisition process (Cook, 1977). As a result, this taxonomy is able to offer insights into how a syllabus might be most effectively structured, as well as the number of course units to be allocated to each section (Nation, 2013).

Finally, the selection of topics is also an important consideration. In cases where learner negotiation might not be feasible, Hedge (2011, p. 351) suggests that "The secret of success seems to lie in choosing topics which are provocative but not offensive, intellectually stimulating but not too arcane, and popular but not bland."

## 2.2 *Assessment considerations*

Having used a theoretical framework as a firm foundation from which to build a sound syllabus, it is next important to consider factors associated with assessment methods and how these methods may be most effectively employed.

Although difficult to articulate, a loose definition of assessment in an EFL context may be thought of as the purposeful gathering, interpreting, recording, and communicating of learners' language abilities (Griffin & Nix, 1991). The purposes for assessment may be numerous, but could include determining how well learners' abilities are progressing, identifying learning difficulties and taking appropriate action, evaluating the effectiveness of a course, and informing teaching practices (Heaton, 1990).

Assessment is generally classified as either formative or summative. Formative assessment is a means of gathering information about a learner's progress, and is used as a diagnostic measure through which to inform further pedagogical decisions (Hedge, 2011). On the other hand, summative assessment is used to measure learner achievement and contributes towards final grades (*ibid.*). Like summative assessment, formative assessment may also occasionally include some form of testing, although the difference between the two lies not in the assess-

ment tools themselves, but rather in their purpose. For this reason, there is debate as to whether assessment should be *of* learning, *for* learning or *as* learning (Earl, 2003).

Traditionally, the assessment approaches mentioned above have been viewed as somewhat incompatible, with Broadfoot (1996, p. 42) going so far as to proclaim: "To measure or to learn, that is the question." Furthermore, each approach has been the target of considerable criticism. For example, single-score assessments *of* learning may be misrepresentative of any learning that may have taken place (Marzono, 2000), while conversely, teachers' assessment *for* learning may be subject to bias, thus throwing validity and reliability into question (Harlen, 2005). Since assessment *as* learning requires the development of metacognitive skills on the part of the learner, Torrance (2007, p. 292) stated that it is necessary to "explore and interrogate criteria, rather than accept them as given", which may be time-consuming and possibly detract from the actual learning of the target language itself.

As with syllabus concerns, perhaps the reconciliation of this incongruence lies in attempting to find a suitably balanced application of both formative and summative assessment approaches. Indeed, as Stiggins *et al.* (2004, p. 5) pointed out, "a balanced assessment system takes advantage of assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning; each can make essential contributions". Similarly, Burke (2010, p. 24) stated that the integration of both formative and summative assessment is "essential".

As already mentioned, finding a suitable degree of balance seems to rest between distinguishing the *purpose* and the *process* of assessment. As Harlen (2005 p. 220) succinctly expressed, "One can conduct the same assessment and use it for different purposes, just as one can travel between two places for different purposes." Thus, any arsenal of assessment tools which lies at a teacher's disposal may be used in various ways depending on whether they are viewed as a "work in progress" (i.e. formative) or a "final version" (i.e. summative). These might include, for example, performance tasks, projects and presentations, reports and essays, quizzes and tests, homework, and reflective journals (Burke, 2009).

Another important factor to consider when assessing learners is the frequency with which assessment ought to be conducted. Since an attempt to find synergy between formative and summative assessment methods seems to be key, implementing continuous assessment throughout a learner's term of study would appear reasonable. Continuous assessment has the benefit of "assessing each student a little and often, rather than testing rarely and intensively" (Bowler & Parminter, 1997, p. 16), while, at the same time, being consistent with a process approach to learning, thereby promoting positive learning habits, traits, and strategies (Porcaro, 2003).

## 3．Course rationale

### 3.1 *Course structure*

On the basis of the above considerations, a principled syllabus with a varied set of assessment criteria was created and implemented. For a suitable balance to be established between product and process approaches, as well as between formative and summative assessment methods (incorporating continuous assessment as an essential underpinning feature), it was decided that the course would be best arranged into thematic blocks—or "cycles"—of four lessons. Thus, each semester consisted of three cycles (i.e. twelve lessons) sandwiched between two introductory lessons and one final review lesson (i.e. fifteen lessons in total). This structure was repeated in both semesters, with only the topics differing between cycles. Each cycle was designed to build upon the last, thereby providing an increasingly progressive demand on the learners in terms of both critical-thinking skills and cognitive load—as advocated in Bloom's taxonomy. It was hoped that this cyclical structure would provide continuity with clear expectations through self-reinforcement from a solid framework, whilst at the same time facilitate autonomy within a flexible and communicative learning environment.

### 3.2 *Content as assessment tools*

The content of each cycle was built around a format which doubled as a set of assessment tools. This namely consisted of two tasks: (1) audio-based homework with follow-up class quizzes; and (2) collaborative, performance-based group projects.

Online audio files with accompanying written exercises set as homework served as the basis of meaning-focused input. Although input does not necessarily equate with uptake (e.g. Schmidt, 2010), these assignments were completed outside of class with the hope that they would not only save subsequent time with the input of linguistic items during class meetings, but also allow for more meaningful, communicative activities to take precedence during direct contact hours. Each cycle contained two audio files. One was a dialogue that emphasized conversation strategies, while the other was a lecture that emphasized academic discourse, as well as study skills such as note-taking and summarizing. Both the dialogue and lecture incorporated relevant vocabulary and grammar structures deemed purposeful for communicating about the given topic of each cycle. Owing to their product-driven nature, these linguistic features largely formed the language-focused learning component of the course. The homework activities were followed up in class with a brief quiz to check retention and application, which, together with the homework, provided a portion of the summative assessment scores since it

was partially viewed as assessment *of* learning. What was studied in the homework and consolidated in the quizzes was then practically applied in subsequent classroom activities, such as paired and group interactions, and served as the platform for meaning-focused output and fluency development. This aspect of the course was largely process-driven, and formed a major part of the formative assessment since it was viewed as assessment *as* learning.

Each cycle concluded with a group project whereby learners collaborated to produce a performance which was connected to a relevant, self-selected aspect of a particular cycle. These included poster presentations, paper slide videos, news reports, and dramas. The lead-up to these final performances, along with the performances themselves, enabled a number of formative assessment tools to be assimilated. These included discussions, role plays, interviews, class surveys, the reporting of information, conducting research and analyzing it, performance preparation, peer evaluation, and self-reflection reports.

One important aspect of language learning is the acquisition of new vocabulary. To facilitate this process, learners were required to keep a detailed record of their vocabulary learning in the form of a notebook following specific criteria. These criteria namely involved noting any new vocabulary and their English definitions, along with contextual example sentences. The notebooks also served as a tool for both formative and summative assessments to be made.

Finally, whether formative or summative, the fact that all of these activities ran throughout each semester meant that continuous assessment was a fundamental principle of the course.

### 3.3  *Topic selection*

The overarching theme chosen for the first semester was communication and culture, and, throughout the span of its three cycles, covered the topics of Japan, technology, and countries and cultures. The rationale for the selection of these topics was that they served as a suitable point of entry due to the fact that oral communication within an international context was an overall objective of the course, as determined by the university. Since schema have long been regarded as an important aspect of learning (e.g. Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), it was hoped that by starting with the familiar topic of Japan, a more successful schematic activation might be elicited, thus providing a useful springboard from which the course could commence. Introducing other countries and cultures later in the first semester was done with a view to allow learners to build upon the skills they had gradually acquired in the preceding cycles.

The second semester was based around the concept of time. Starting with the past and relaying life experiences, it then moved into the present with a focus on ethical issues, before finishing with speculations about life in the future. These were deemed suitable topics since

they could easily be used to stimulate learner interest owing to both their flexibility and universal nature, while, at the same time, necessitating certain linguistic features (particularly that of tense), thereby creating a balance between product and process approaches. (A one-semester sample syllabus may be seen in Appendix A.)

## 4．Research questions

Having designed and implemented the course for a full academic year, it was important to establish whether the principled decisions upon which it was based were effective from the standpoint of the learners. Thus, the following research questions were formulated and served as the basis of investigation:

(1) Syllabus
- *Do learners perceive themselves as benefitting from structured and repeated components in a course that implements a mixed product and process syllabus?*

(2) Assessment
- *Do learners prefer a varied blend of summative and formative assessment methods?*
- *Are learners generally in favour of continuous assessment?*

## 5．Method

### 5.1 *Participants*

Participants were 18- and 19-year old, first-year, Japanese university students at a private university in Osaka. They were studying various subjects within the faculties of engineering, economics, business studies, sociology, policy, law, and literature. Approximately half were male and half were female. The average learners' level of language proficiency was intermediate, and all had previously received at least six years of formal EFL instruction. As a compulsory feature of the university curriculum, all first year students are required to take an oral English communication course, which was used as the platform for conducting this study. The total number of lessons in one academic year was thirty, with one ninety-minute lesson each week per fifteen-week semester.

## 5.2 *Data collection procedure*

Data was collected at the completion of the first year of study through a link to an open source online survey ("Survey Monkey") sent to the learners via email. Out of the 257 learners enrolled on the course, a total of 118 responded, producing an approximate 46% response rate. Although a higher response rate may have been obtained had the survey been conducted during class time, it was deemed more appropriate to allow learners to complete it in their own time rather than in class. Thus, it was hoped that any potential bias arising from time restraints and the teacher's presence may have been reduced as a result (Burkey & Kuechler, 2003). The survey could be accessed easily on mobile devices, and all responses were anonymous. Completion time for the survey was estimated to be around ten to fifteen minutes.

Research has indicated that survey responses are both more accurate and honest when administered in a learner's mother tongue (e.g. Cohen, Manion, & Morris, 2005). For this reason, the survey was conducted entirely in Japanese. It consisted mainly of closed "yes-no" style questions with the opportunity to provide follow-up responses, although some open-ended questions were also included. The total number of survey items was fifteen. Once all the surveys were completed, the data was automatically collated by the website software, which hoped to ensure an accurate reading. (The items included in the questionnaire may be seen in Appendix B.)

## 6．Results

In seeking to establish the effectiveness of the principled decisions upon which the course design was based, the survey revealed that, in general, favourable attitudes prevailed.

## 6.1 *Syllabus-related results*

The first research question aimed to investigate whether the learners perceived benefit from structured and repeated components in a course. Thus, when asked whether the overall cycle system was helpful, 100% of the respondents reported that they thought it was. Follow-up questions to ascertain the reasons for the learners' opinions elicited a variety of responses. Around a third of the learners stated that they enjoyed having structure and knowing what to expect (34.2%); others expressed that they enjoyed consolidating what they had learnt in previous lessons and cycles (28.2%); some reported that it helped them build their communication skills (23.1%); while others stated that it was a combination of all these reasons (12.8%). With regard to the most suitable number of cycles per semester, 95.8% of respon-

dents stated that it was three, with 2.5% stating it was too many and 1.7% as too few. As to whether four lessons per cycle was appropriate, 89.8% believed it to be about right; 5.9% too many; and 4.2% too few. Respondents who deemed two audio files per cycle as a suitable amount totalled as 79.5%, with 20.5% preferring only one. Finally, those in favour of one presentation per cycle amounted to 93.2%, while 6.8% would have preferred not to have any presentations at all.

## 6.2 *Assessment-related results*

The section of the survey relating to assessment sought to address the double-pronged issue of whether learners preferred a varied blend of summative and formative assessment methods, and whether learners were in favour of continuous assessment.

In an attempt to gain an overall picture of the assessment tools, learner attitudes were investigated towards each cycle's use of audio files, class quizzes, vocabulary notebooks, and group presentations. It was found that 93.2% of learners believed that using audio files was a good way to learn. When asked to justify their responses, over two-thirds expressed a positive regard towards the opportunity of being exposed to English spoken by native speakers (69.1%); others reported that the audio files and accompanying homework were effective means to learn new communication strategies (9.1%), as well as new vocabulary (6.4%); while others stated that it was a combination of all these factors (12.7%). In terms of the class quizzes, 75.2% of respondents believed them to be an effective way of consolidating what was studied in the homework; 7.7% believed them to be ineffective; while 17.7% were indifferent. As far as keeping an assessed vocabulary notebook was concerned, 63.8% believed it was a worthwhile endeavour, while 36.2 % dismissed its relevance as a valuable learning tool. Of those who were in favour, 38.9% believed that keeping a vocabulary notebook was an effective means of memorizing new words and phrases; 29.9% stated that writing English definitions served as a useful tool through which to process the meaning of new words; 18.8% explained that writing example sentences assisted with learning how to correctly apply unfamiliar words to their appropriate context; while 12.9% expressed that being in charge of their own vocabulary learning helped them achieve all of the above objectives. Of the 36.2% who held unfavorable attitudes towards vocabulary notebooks, the greatest dissatisfaction was that they failed to assist in the memorization of new words or phrases (42.9%). Further qualitative data relating to the assessment was gathered, and will be discussed in the next section.

As to whether continuous assessment was generally favoured, learners were asked if they believed that receiving a score in almost every lesson that contributed to their final grade was

beneficial. It was found that 93.2% believed this to be the case. When asked for the reasoning behind their responses, 28.2% stated that it was a fairer method of assessment owing to the importance of consistent effort. A further 38.2% held the attitude that it was less stressful than one or two heavily-weighted tests, while 20.9% reported that it helped raise motivation. The remaining 12.7% stated that continuous assessment was beneficial for all of the above factors.

## 7．Discussion

The results generally indicated favourable attitudes towards a mixed product and process syllabus with structured and repeated components. Learners also seemed to prefer a varied blend of summative and formative assessment methods, and appeared to favour continuous assessment. This is useful information because it helps support the principled decisions upon which the course design was based.

Although the course might be judged as a relative success on the basis of learner feedback, this is by no means a definitive claim towards the syllabus and assessment methods as being without flaws. Indeed, as Hadley (1998, p. 50) pointed out, "Due to the complexity of teaching a foreign language, any syllabus design will have its share of strengths and weaknesses." Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the course was its cyclical structure, as all of the learners held the attitude that it was a helpful way to approach their studies. It is important to note that although 100% preferable results were obtained from this section of the survey, only 46% of all those enrolled on the course were represented owing to the response rate. Thus, learners who might have been reluctant to answer positively may not have chosen to respond to the survey from the outset. However, supplementary statements from the survey[1] also reflected positive views (e.g. *I thought the course was really well put together*). Building upon this cyclical framework also provided a structured means of applying a practical blend of product and process approaches. What might be more important, however, is *how* these approaches are applied. Indeed, as White (1988, p. 110) advocated, teaching methodology is generally more important than the syllabus itself. Therefore, although the cycle system was regarded in extremely favourable terms, it is necessary to view the pedagogical approaches employed within the syllabus, along with the assessment methods, as equally important, if not more important. Another factor to consider is the fact that all of the learners were first-year university students, and consequently had insufficient prior experience to compare with other EFL courses at a tertiary level. For this reason, it would be useful to implement the same course framework with more seasoned university students (particularly those in their fourth

year of study), and gauge whether similarly favourable responses are observed.

In terms of the specific assessment methods utilized, the results point towards the audio-based homework and class quizzes as being satisfactory pedagogical choices. This was also demonstrated in some of the open-ended survey data (e.g. *I really feel that I've improved my language skills through listening to the audio files, and I've also developed a deeper interest in English*). In spite of the scores from the homework and quizzes contributing towards the final grade, the results from the survey demonstrated that since they were distributed evenly across each semester, the emphasis placed on continuous assessment was perceived as both fairer and less stressful than a traditional end-of-semester test. Owing to the audio files being administered online, the homework also allowed for blended learning. Positive attitudes towards this were also reflected in some of the qualitative data. The rapidly-growing field of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is able to provide learners with various benefits (e.g. Miangah & Nezarat, 2012), some of which were stated by the survey respondents. These included being able to complete homework tasks in any location of one's choosing at a self-governed pace (e.g. *I can listen to it on my smartphone, so I can study anywhere*), as well as catering to supplementary learner needs beyond the parameters of the course (e.g. *It is helpful for preparing for the TOEIC listening test*).

The distinction between summative and formative assessment is another significant factor in course design. Whereas the audio homework and the class quizzes formed a section of the syllabus that was based on a modified version of summative assessment through assessment *of* learning, the onus on the learners to rely largely on themselves for the performance-based group presentations at the end of each cycle meant that this portion of the syllabus served as assessment *as* learning, and, for this reason, was essentially formative. The benefits of performance-based assessment are manifold for both teachers and learners alike. For instance, it allows teachers to gauge with which degree of success learners are able to apply knowledge, which, in turn, can provide focus for future instruction (Marzano, Pickering & McTighe, 1993). On the part of the learner, it can increase confidence and motivation (Valdez-Pierce, 2002), as well as improve learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2002). It was also hoped that by encouraging learners to pursue their own interests with creativity in a co-operative and stimulating environment, they would push themselves beyond their own perceived capacity and make greater progress on both linguistic and meta-learning levels. Examples of this include designing and evaluating a new invention followed by giving a group poster presentation about it; and researching a foreign country in order to create a group travel report about it. Qualitative data from the survey indicated that this might well have been beneficial, as is illus-

trated in these independent responses:

> *Using different communication tools made me think in different ways, which I had not previously done.*

> *It was the first time I had come across presentations in the form of a test, but I think it was a great way to make progress with my communications skills.*

> *Even though it was difficult for me to know exactly what to include in each presentation, it was a great learning process.*

> *Through working together as a group, we were able to share opinions and really get to know each other. I really enjoyed the freedom of being able to choose our own roles in the presentations.*

> *Doing many performance-based activities forced me to be more spontaneous. Communicating with both my peers and teacher was not only enjoyable, but also helped me to improve my English skills.*

An area of the course which perhaps requires attention for future revision is that of how the vocabulary notebooks were utilized. Although intended as a joint learning and assessment tool, over one third (36.2 %) of the survey respondents expressed a certain degree of dissatisfaction. Some of the reasons given, which have already been explained in the results section above, were further embellished by optional comments. These largely fell into two categories. The first was that English-only definitions of vocabulary items were perhaps too restrictive (e.g. *Not using any Japanese definitions meant that it was hard to quickly check the meaning when I was trying to memorize the new vocabulary*). This restriction might have been more cognitively demanding, meaning that it could have taken longer to process and consequently hamper retention (see Mendonça, 2003). The second category was a tendency to neglect revision (e.g. *I didn't really give myself enough opportunity to go back and review what I had written*). To counter these two drawbacks, it would be worthwhile in the future to consider incorporating L1 definitions, as well as to perhaps integrate interactive elicitation quizzes in learner pairs (see Zimmerman, 2012).

Although the survey revealed some detailed insights into learner perceptions of the course,

it was certainly not exhaustive, and so it would be useful to gather further quantitative data regarding other factors. Namely, these are the appropriateness of the selected topics and the effectiveness of the formative assessment methods other than the group projects, especially performance preparation and peer evaluations, since these emphasized learner autonomy. This would perhaps provide acumen as to whether learners ought to be given an even greater degree of control as the course progresses. Allowing for more flexibility in this regard would thus enable an evolving needs analysis to take place. Traditional perceptions of Japanese learners have typically portrayed them as lacking initiative and unable to take control of their own learning; perhaps historically due to the teacher being viewed as a disseminator of information and the student as a mere passive recipient (e.g. Ng, 2001). However, this self-limiting view certainly now seems to be changing, as there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise (e.g. Holden & Usuki, 1999; Gamble *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, it would be meaningful for future course development to focus on learners having more control of the syllabus content and assessment methods through negotiating various elements such as topic selection and assessment weightings (e.g. Litz, 2007).

Finally, in spite of the overall limitations mentioned in this discussion, it was found that the learners were generally satisfied with the course, since overall perceptions of their improvement, as well as their motivation, were generally found to increase. Specifically, when asked whether they felt their English communication skills had increased upon completion of the course, 78.8% stated that they had. Furthermore, 85.5% stated that they consequently felt more motivated to continue improving the skills they had acquired. This can be taken as encouragement that the factors taken into consideration during the design of the course were at least moving in a positive direction.

## 8．Conclusion

Having reviewed the literature and considered various theoretical options with regard to course design, the focus of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of its practical application from a detailed analysis of learner feedback. In particular, the study sought to establish whether learner perceptions supported the principled decisions that created the framework for a first-year Japanese university oral communication class. The research questions centred on syllabus and assessment considerations, and specifically addressed (1) whether learners perceived themselves as benefitting from structured and repeated components in a course that implemented a mixed product and process syllabus; and (2) whether learners preferred a

varied blend of summative and formative assessment methods, and were generally in favour of continuous assessment.

The results indicated that learners expressed positive attitudes towards structured and repeated components in the course when they were organized into systematic four-lesson cycles of study. It was also found that the learners were satisfied with a combination of summative and formative assessment methods. Summative methods included the use of audio files in a blended online-learning context, which were used in conjunction with follow-up class quizzes. Formative methods included performance-based group projects with reflective peer evaluations. The notion of these assessment methods being employed continuously throughout the duration of the course was favoured by the learners, since it was perceived as fairer and encouraged consistent effort.

Several limitations of the study emerged, bringing to attention further considerations for future course revisions. Namely, these were that the learner group were relatively inexperienced at a tertiary level of education and consequently had no other means of comparing courses; vocabulary learning might be enhanced by offering the optional inclusion of L1 definitions and the use of more interactive methods of memorization; and, finally, to emphasize further the role of learner autonomy through allowing broader scope for an evolving needs analysis with learner-negotiated elements where deemed appropriate. In spite of these limitations, it is hoped that the findings from this study will provide insights for other EFL professionals involved in the decision-making process of course design.

## Note

1) Open-ended survey data was gathered from the "Other" sections of the survey, namely Questions 3, 8, 11, 12, and 15. The relative amount of the responses for these questions are indicated as percentages in Appendix B. Examples of the most pertinent comments have been translated as accurately as possible and cited in this Discussion section.

## References

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## APPENDIX A
## One-semester syllabus

| | Topic | Details | Class assessment | Homework |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Introduction** | Course introduction | - | Review for course intro test; Make notebook |
| **2** | | Getting to know each other | (1) Course intro test [5%] [Entry Test] | Practice mini speech |
| **3** | Cycle 1: **Japan** | Traditional Japanese things | Mini speeches [NOT assessed] | Dialogue 1 |
| **4** | | Modern Japanese subculture | (2) Quiz (about Dialogue 1) [+ HW = 5%] | Lecture 1; Find pictures |
| **5** | | Opinions about Japan | (3) Quiz (about Lecture 1) [+ HW = 5%] | Prepare presentation |
| **6** | | Presentations | Presentation 1 [10%] | - |
| **7** | Cycle 2: **Technology** | Technology in everyday life | - | Lecture 2 |
| **8** | | New invention ideas | (4) Quiz (about Lecture 2) [+ HW = 5%] Notebook check 1 [5%] | Dialogue 2 |
| **9** | | Evaluating invention ideas | (5) Quiz (about Dialogue 2) [+ HW = 5%] | Prepare presentation |
| **10** | | Poster presentations | Presentation 2 [10%] | - |
| **11** | Cycle 3: **Countries & cultures** | Travel experiences & aspirations | - | Dialogue 3 |
| **12** | | Giving info about countries | (6) Quiz (about Dialogue 3) [+ HW = 5%] | Lecture 3; Extra HW sheet |
| **13** | | Researching info about countries | (7) Quiz (about Lecture 3) [+ HW = 5%] Notebook check 2 [5%] | Prepare presentation |
| **14** | | Travel report presentations | Presentation 3 [10%] | Review lessons 1–14 |
| **15** | **Review** | Wrap-up | [Exit Test] (8) Review presentations [5%] | - |

## APPENDIX B
### Full survey with English translation and results (118 respondents)

(1) Before this class did you enjoy studying English?
   この講座を受ける前、英語を楽しんで勉強していましたか？
      Yes (52.5%) / Neither (26.3%) / No (21.2%)

(2) Do you ever use English outside the classroom?
   これまで教室以外に英語を使う機会はありましたか？
      Yes (42.7%) / No (57.3%)

(3) Did you think that the overall "cycle system" was helpful?
   4レッスン毎にテーマが変わる「サイクルシステム」はいい勉強方法でしたか？
   Yes (100%) Why?
   もし、いい学習方法だと思うのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。
   • I enjoyed having a structure & knowing what to expect (34.2%)
        授業が体系的で、学習形式を事前に予測できたから。
   • I enjoyed consolidating what I learnt in previous lessons & cycles (28.2%)
        受講した授業やサイクルで習ったことを楽しんで習得できたから。
   • It helped me build my communication skills (23.1%)
        コミュニケーションスキルを向上させることができたから。
   • All of the above reasons (12.8%)
        上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
   • Other: please state (1.7%)
        その他：理由を述べてください。
   No (0%) Why?
   もし、いい学習方法だと思わないのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。
   • I prefer not having a structure (0%)
        決まった体系の授業が好きではない。
   • I prefer choosing my own different topic each lesson (0%)
        毎授業ごとに異なった話題を選びたかったから。
   • It didn't help me build my communication skills (0%)
        コミュニケーションスキルを向上させることができなかったから。
   • All of the above reasons (0%)
        上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
   • Other: please state (0%)
        その他：理由を述べてください。

(4) What did you think about having 3 cycles per semester?
   (If too many or not enough, how many would be best?)
   一つの学期が3つのサイクルで構成されていることをどう思いますか？

多すぎる、ちょうどいい、少なすぎるのうちどちらでしょうか。(もし多すぎる、少なすぎると感じたのであれば、適切なサイクルの数を教えてください。)

   Too many (2.5%) / Just right (95.8%) / Not enough (1.7%)

(5) What did you think about having 4 lessons per cycle?

(If too many or not enough, how many would be best?)

一つのサイクルが4つの授業で構成されていることをどう思いますか？

多すぎる、ちょうどいい、少なすぎるのうちどちらでしょうか。

(もし多すぎる、少なすぎると感じたのであれば、適切な授業の数を教えてください。)

   Too many (5.9%) / Just right (89.9%) / Not enough (4.2%)

(6) What did you think about having 2 sound files per cycle?

(If too many or not enough, how many would be best?)

1つのサイクルに2つのサウンドファイルが設定されていることをどう思いますか？

多すぎる、ちょうどいい、少なすぎるのうちどちらでしょうか。

(もし多すぎる、少なすぎると感じたのであれば、適切なサウンドファイルの数を教えてください。)

   Too many (20.5%) / Just right (79.5%) / Not enough (0%)

(7) What did you think about having 1 presentation per cycle?

(If too many or not enough, how many would be best?)

1つのサイクルに1つのプレゼンテーションが設定されていることをどう思いますか？

多すぎる、ちょうどいい、少なすぎるのうちどちらでしょうか。

(もし多すぎる、少なすぎると感じたのであれば、適切なプレゼンテーションの数を教えてください。)

   Too many (6.8%) / Just right (93.2%) / Not enough (0%)

(8) Did you think that the sound files were a good way to learn?

サウンドファイルはよい学習方法だと思いますか？

   Yes (93.2%) Why?

もし、いい学習方法だと思うのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。

- I could become familiar with native English (69.1%)
  - ネイティヴの英語になれることができたから。
- I could learn new vocabulary & grammar (6.4%)
  - 新しい単語や文法を学ぶことができたから。
- I could learn new communication strategies (9.1%)
  - 新しいコミュニケーションの仕方を学ぶことができたから。
- All of the above (12.7%)
  - 上記３つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state (2.7%)
  - その他：理由を述べてください。

No (6.8%) Why?
もし、いい学習方法だと思わないのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。

- I prefer reading-based homework (22.2%)
  読解を中心とした宿題を好むから。
- I prefer writing-based homework (11.1%)
  作文を中心とした宿題を好むから。
- I couldn't understand the purpose of the sound files (22.2%)
  サウンドファイルの目的がよくわからないから。
- All of the above (0%)
  上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state (44%)
  その他：理由を述べてください。

(9) On average, how many times did you listen to each sound file?
平均して、それぞれのサウンドファイルを何回くらい聞きましたか？
0 (0%) / 1-2 (13.7%) / 3-4 (28.2%) / 5-6 (39.3%) / 7+ (18.8%)

(10) Did you find the quizzes were a good way to confirm what you learnt in the homework?
毎回のクイズ（授業の始めの小テスト）は宿題で学んだことを確認するのによい方法でしたか？
はい、いいえ、どちらともいえない、で答えてください。
Yes (75.2%) / Neither (17.7%) / No (7.7%)

(11) Did you feel it was good to receive a score in almost every lesson?
ほとんどの授業で小テストやノート、発表などの得点を受け取ることはよいことだと感じましたか？
Yes (93.2%) Why?
もし、いいと思うのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。

- It's fairer because consistent effort is important (28.2%)
  継続した努力が大切だと思うので、公平だったと思うから。
- It's less stressful than one or two big tests (38.2%)
  一つや二つの大きなテストで評価されたくなかったから。
- It helped my motivation (20.9%)
  やる気につながったから。
- All of the above (12.7%)
  上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state reasons (0%)
  その他：理由を述べてください。

No (6.8%) Why?
もし、いいと思わないのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。

- It was too stressful having to make a consistent effort (25%)
  継続した努力をするのが大変だったから。

- I prefer to have one or two big tests instead (37.5%)
  一つか二つの大きなテストで評価されるほうが好きだったから。
- It reduced my motivation (12.5%)
  やる気につながらなかったから。
- All of the above (0%)
  上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state reasons (25%)
  その他：理由を述べてください。

(12) Did you find it useful to keep a vocabulary notebook?
　　単語ノートを続けることは役に立ちましたか？
　　　Yes (63.8%) Why?
　　もし、いいと思うのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。
- Writing new vocabulary helped me memorize new words and phrases (39%)
  新しい単語や表現を覚えることに役立ったから。
- Writing English definitions helped me understand the meaning of new words (29.9%)
  新しい単語の定義を書くことがその言葉を意味を理解するために役立ったから。
- Writing example sentences helped me understand how to use the words correctly (18.2%)
  例文を書くことがその単語を正しい使い方を理解することに役立ったから。
- All of the above (13%)
  上記3つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state reasons (0%)
  その他：理由を述べてください。

　　No (36.2%) Why?
　　もし、いいと思わないのであれば次の中から一つ理由を選んでください。
- Writing new vocabulary did not help me memorize new words and phrases (42.9%)
  新しい単語や表現を覚えることに役立たなかったから。
- Writing English definitions did not help me understand the meaning of new words (33.3%)
  新しい単語の定義を書くことがその言葉を意味を理解するために役立ったなかったから。
- Writing example sentences did not help me understand how to use the words correctly 4.8%)
  例文を書くことがその単語を正しい使い方を理解することに役立ったから。
- All of the above (2.4%)
  上記３つの理由全てが当てはまるから。
- Other: please state reasons (16.7%)
  その他：理由を述べてください。

(13) After completing this course do you feel you have improved your English communication skills?

この講座を修了して、あなたの英語コミュニケーションスキルは向上したと感じますか？はい、いいえ、どちらともいえない、で答えてください。

   Yes (78.8%) / Neither (17.8%) / No (3.4%)

(14) Do you now feel more motivated to improve your English communication skills?

あなたの英語コミュニケーションスキルを向上させたいというやる気をさらに感じますか？はい、いいえ、どちらともいえない、で答えてください。

   Yes (85.5%) / Neither (12.8%) / No (1.7%)

(15) Do you have any other comments? (25.4%)

何か意見や感想があれば述べてください。