



Student Teachers' Perceptions of Language Syllabus Design Process

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative-oriented research is to uncover Thai EFL student teachers' perceptions toward language syllabus design process. The method used in this research was a focus group discussion. Groups of senior student teachers from three different universities in urban and local areas of Thailand were purposively selected to compare their perceptions. The findings reveal that the perceptions of student teachers from the two urban and well-resourced universities were generally similar, though they are not well-matched to ideas of school-based curriculum and syllabus design. On the other hand, the perceptions of student teachers from the rural university were different—they struggled to describe the steps and people involved in the design process. This research suggests that, for student teachers to develop critical perspectives on syllabus design process, teacher preparation courses at college or university should provide sufficient hands-on opportunities to practice planning, implementing and evaluating language syllabuses for different classroom contexts. Student teachers should be equipped with a clear understanding of the syllabus design process, which helps them become autonomous implementers of school-based curricula.

Keywords: Syllabus Design, Student Teachers, Teachers' Perceptions, School-Based Curriculum

Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) is one of the compulsory subjects of the national core curriculum in Thailand, and the development of English language ability has a significant role in national economic development (Kam, 2002). As in many countries in East Asia (such as Putri, 2016; Iskandar, 2015; Nguyen, 2011; Wang, 2008), considerable investment has been made by Thai governments in English curriculum policy development to improve standards of English teaching and learning in schools across the country. Beginning in 1999, the Ministry of Education decided to shift English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum policy from being centralized to decentralized (Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), 1999). The decentralized curriculum policy emphasizes the importance of school-based curriculum and the role of school administrators and teachers as curriculum and syllabus designers. Consequently, all public school teachers are encouraged to strategically design English course syllabuses to serve the needs of local learners. Thus, while the national curriculum acts as a platform

that frames some essential learning outcomes and content to be considered and included in schools' curricula, school teachers are expected to study the needs of local stakeholders, develop localized syllabuses and evaluate their classroom teaching and learning to ensure that their students are equipped with the expected knowledge and skill outcomes.

In practice, however, there are some deviations in implementing the reformed curriculum policy as discussed by Chayarathree and Waugh (2006), for example, most Thai EFL teachers preferred to adopt commercial textbooks suggested by well-known publishers as course syllabuses, instead of developing their own. The wide use of textbooks was based on the teachers' views that these books were designed by experts who could plan teaching and learning content and activities according to core curriculum requirements better than the teachers could. Furthermore, Mackenzie (2002) summarized some barriers to implementation of the reformed EFL curriculum: for example, skills deficit, workload issues, and unwillingness to change,



as faced and reported by the ministry of education in planning meetings and in newspaper articles.

In response to the EFL core curriculum reformation in Thailand, many studies have been conducted to follow up on the curriculum implementation (e.g. Hayes, 2010; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2009; Chayarathee and Waugh, 2006; Mackenzie, 2002). However, most previous studies in this field only focused on groups of in-service teachers and their difficulties in designing language curricula and syllabuses, whilst student teachers were somehow neglected. In fact, teachers' failure to cope with the demands of educational innovation, especially novice teachers, may be an effect of inadequate preparation and training provision from teachers training programs at college or university. Therefore, this research suggests that student teachers and their perceptions play a critical role in education development. The aim of this research is to use a focus group discussion to find out: *How do EFL student teachers in Thailand perceive the language syllabus design process and their role as syllabus designers?* This article contends that a case study of this type can be used in other contexts where language syllabus development is decentralized, to reflect the current perception student teachers have toward the language syllabus design process, and what understanding they require to be independent syllabus designers.

Literature Review

Richards (2001) defines language *curriculum* as documentation of philosophical, social, and administrative plans related to EFL teaching and learning. Compared to a curriculum, a *language syllabus* is more localized — it focuses more specifically on a selection of teaching content and material based at classroom level (Nunan, 1988, p. 8). According to Graves (2000), a syllabus encompasses specific course-related information, such as: course description, course aims and objectives, learning content, teaching

methods, and grading system. To design a language syllabus, many frameworks have been developed by experts in the field of language education policies (for example, Nunan, 1985, 1988; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Richards, 1990, 2001) to make a complex process explicit and easily followable by practitioners. One well-known language syllabus design framework is Graves's (2000) 7-step procedure, details of which are as follows:

Environment assessment involves defining the context of teaching and learning by searching for information and trying to understand the students, physical setting, and nature of institution, available resources and available time.

Principles application is when a teacher or a course designer articulates his/her beliefs about what language is and how it should be taught and learnt. Richards (2001) suggests that the underlying principles of a syllabus should be consistent with what is stated in a core curriculum.

Need assessment involves assessing learners' needs, acquiring an understanding of their language educational background, attitudes, wishes, and preferences toward language learning. Different types of needs can be assessed by looking at: 'target needs' and 'learning needs' (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), or 'necessities, lacks and wants' (Nation and Macalister, 2010). Information about needs can be retrieved from students as well as teachers, parents, employers, and other related stakeholders.

Goals and objectives determination includes setting goals and objectives as guidelines for teachers when planning a course of study. Goals are expected outcomes of the course, generally influenced by analysis of students' needs, educational policies, and the environment. Stern (1992) categorizes four types of goals for language learners: proficiency goals, cognitive goals, affective goals, and transfer goals. Objectives are statements of course content and activities. Saphier and Gower (1987) propose five types of objectives



for language teaching: content coverage objectives, activity objectives, involvement objectives, mastery objectives, and critical thinking objectives.

Content conceptualization includes designing a course syllabus and organizing course units and content. This is the step when a syllabus type is selected, and possibly more than one type can be combined or integrated.

Materials and activities selection and development involves choosing or developing materials and activities that help students achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Course evaluation includes student assessment and evaluation of the course itself to determine the program's effectiveness and discover how the program can be improved. In addition to assessing students' proficiency, progress and achievement, every part of the course development process should be assessed as well. Nguyen (2016) points out that supports from the school authorities, fellow teachers and students are very essential for the course evaluation.

The above framework only acts as a general guide on how to approach a syllabus design, "it is not a framework of equal parts; each individual context determines which processes need the most time and attention" (Graves, 1996, p. 12). In practice, teachers should understand the philosophical stance underlying the core curriculum before implementing it in syllabus design. In some countries, such as Vietnam (Canh and Barnard, 2009) and Libya (Orafi and Borg, 2009), teachers do not design their own syllabuses since there is a unit of authority (usually the ministry of education's unit) responsible for specifying teaching and learning content and activities. This strategy for curriculum implementation is called a top-down imposition of prescribed curriculum (Chin, 1967). In other countries, such as Indonesia (Iskandar, 2015) and Thailand (Nutravong, 2002), where decentralized curriculum policy is promoted, the core curriculum is used as a guideline for school teachers to design their own syllabuses. Teachers need to understand and develop a

perception of their role as a syllabus designer who best knows their learners' needs and classroom situations.

However, previous research found factors which are barriers to decentralized curriculum policy implementation, amongst the factors cited are: shortage of appropriately trained teachers (Atagi, 2002; Punthumasan, 2007), poorly prepared teachers (Foley, 2005; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2009), and high demands on teachers' creativity and innovation (Putri, 2016). Additionally, it was revealed through Hayes's (2010) interview with an EFL teacher in Thailand that most student teachers lacked practical preparation and mentoring in college in preparing a course syllabus. "During the practicum itself, they (most Thai student teachers) also received little guidance from established teachers in the school..." (Hayes, 2010, p. 311). As a result, it could be inferred that EFL student teachers in Thailand may not fully develop understanding of how to develop a syllabus relevant to their educational context, devise lesson plans, select or develop teaching materials and activities.

The aim of this research is to examine Thai EFL student teachers' perceptions toward the language syllabus design process. Humans are capable of interpreting what they hear or see, and categorizing it into an experience or sensation which is called *perception*. Richards (1985) defined perception as the recognition and understanding of events, objects, and stimuli through the use of senses. A person's unique perception of surrounding objects is derived from his or her previous learning experience. The study of perception is vitally important since the student teachers' perceptions toward the syllabus design process could reflect the extent of their experience gained from teacher training courses, as well as determining their future actions as syllabus designers.

Research Methods and Participants

This research used a focus group discussion and questions on the syllabus design process (i.e. How



should teachers design a syllabus? Who should be involved in the syllabus design process?) to obtain qualitative data. Focus group discussion is a method for exploring what a specific group of people think, feel, or perceive about a topic (Sommer and Sommer, 2002). It promotes the participants interaction with each other, and allows for reflection on their views of the syllabus design process. Focus groups are more efficient than individual interviews in that all the group participants are stimulated to express their perceptions and contribute to the discussion at a single time.

Participants were purposively selected from three well-known universities in Thailand that provide an undergraduate education program majoring in EFL teaching. Two are based in Bangkok and the other one is based in a northern province of Thailand. All have connections with local state schools where senior

student teachers can complete a practicum experience. Student teachers selected for this study were senior students who had passed the course on language course and syllabus design and were already equipped with some basic principles related to these issues. This characteristic enabled them to provide information-rich cases with respect to the purpose of the study. The group size was 6 people, small enough to allow genuine discussion (Sommer and Sommer, 2002). To protect confidentiality, university and participant names are kept anonymous. Pseudonyms given to the universities, and ranking according to Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) world university rankings have been identified (See Table 1). Participants in each group have been numbered (1–6) instead of giving their real names.

Table 1 Participants' Information

	Faculty / University	Location	Participant	
			Female	Male
Group A	Faculty of Humanities, Public University A	Bangkok, Thailand	3	3
Group B	Faculty of Education, Public University B	Bangkok, Thailand	2	4
Group C	Faculty of Humanities, Public University C	Northern Province, Thailand	3	3

Each focus group discussion started with the researcher as a moderator explaining the research aim, and discussion issues to each participant. To establish trustworthiness, participants were informed in as much detail as possible about the research and the confidentiality of the information they would provide. The researcher gave a brief explanation about each question that triggers participants to share ideas, to help them understand the discussion points. To avoid the effect of group pressure, participants were asked to answer questions individually by writing in the provided paper, before sharing their perceptions with the other group members. The discussions, conducted in Thai, were recorded and translated into English. For respondent validation, the participants were asked to verify the transcript of their responses. Data was then analytically

read, and reflective memo writing and coding methods were applied to look for regularity of patterns of ideas from participants. To assure reliability, In Vivo Coding (Saldana, 2013) was used to code the perceptions of themes rooted in the participants' discourse. This coding method extracts codes directly from words or phrases said by participants. Categories which emerged from codes were labelled and made available for reporting as research results.

Findings

The data revealed that the participants of Group A and Group B had similar views on how a syllabus should be developed, and who should be involved in the development process (Table 2).



Table 2 Summary of Participants' Perceptions toward Procedure of Syllabus Development and People Involved

	Procedure of Syllabus Development	People Involved
<i>Group A</i> (A1-A6)	a. Studying the core curriculum	a. Teachers
	b. Defining learning objectives	b. School authorities, such as a program director a school principal
	c. Analyzing learners	c. Community representatives
	d. Selecting and sequencing learning content	d. Learners
	e. Selecting or designing learning materials and activities	
	f. Defining assessment system	
<i>Group B</i> (B1-B6)	a. Studying the core curriculum	a. Teachers
	b. Selecting and sequencing learning content	b. School authorities, such as a program director or school principal
	c. Drafting a syllabus	
	d. Having the draft assessed by the school's responsible authority	
<i>Group C</i> (C1-C4)	a. Studying the core curriculum	(C1-C4) a. Teachers b. Learners c. School authorities
	b. Analyzing those who are affected by the course	
	c. Analyzing expected outcome	
	d. Designing the course	
	(C3) a. Planning learning content	
b. Developing learning content		
c. Assess the learning content		
d. Analyze the learning content		
e. Using analysis results to develop a syllabus		

In comparing views towards syllabus design, respondents of both groups were aware of the two steps: a) studying the core curriculum and b) selecting and sequencing learning content, that should be included when designing a language syllabus. However, participants from Group A seemed to focus more on activities of planning and developing a syllabus. As can be seen from the data, three steps as parts of the stages of planning and development were added, i.e. defining learning objectives, analyzing learners, selecting or designing learning materials and activities. For instance, A1 stated "A syllabus guides what teachers will teach, so teachers should generally define teaching objectives, content, and assessment methods". Participants from Group B put an emphasis more on activities of syllabus assessment, as they mentioned the importance of the stages of drafting a syllabus, and having it assessed by the school authorities. B1 provided an interesting comment, saying "I think a school normally provides a syllabus design format for teachers,

a proposed syllabus design different from this may be not accepted". This statement appears to determine the student teacher's perception that deviates from the school-based curriculum's aim regarding syllabus design, which tries to empower teachers to develop their own syllabuses independently.

Regarding the Group C student teachers, their views toward syllabus design process were too diverse to be summarized as a response from the group. In addition, their perceptions were quite different from those of respondents from Group A and Group B. Two students, C1, C2, perceived that the syllabus design process included: a) studying the core curriculum, b) analyzing those who are affected by the course, c) analyzing expected outcome, d) designing the course. While C3 provided a different view, stating that the process included the following steps: a) planning learning content, b) developing learning content, c) assessing the learning content, d) analyzing the learning content, e) using analysis results to develop a syllabus.



This perception toward the syllabus design process, focusing only on learning content, infers the extent of the understanding held by this student teacher (C3) which is insufficient for practical language teachers to be autonomous syllabus developers. The other Group C respondents (C4–C6), did not share their views on the syllabus design process.

When asked about who should be involved in the syllabus design process, participants from Group A and Group B perceived that teachers should design their own syllabuses. They seemed to acknowledge that policy planners such as program directors or school principals were responsible for assessing the syllabuses produced. For instance, A2 pointed out that "Teachers are key persons in the syllabus design process". Similarly, B2 said that "After studying the core curriculum, teachers must propose a course syllabus to the English department director, then have it approved by the school principal". More specifically, Group A student teachers also perceived the importance of two other stakeholders in syllabus design—learners and community representatives, who give information about their needs to school authorities and teachers.

On the other hand, Group C participants' responses revealed mixed perceptions about who should be involved in the syllabus design process. Similar to participants from Group A and Group B, most Group C participants (C1–C4) perceived that teachers, learners, and school authorities are involved in the design process. However, some held perceptions which reflect limited understanding of syllabus design. For instance, C1 perceived that "Only teachers are responsible for designing syllabuses", C2 perceived that "A syllabus is designed by the Ministry of Education".

Discussion

While the student teachers from the medium and high-ranking universities in Bangkok (Group A and Group B) held quite similar perceptions about the

process and people involved in language syllabus design, the perceptions of those from the lower ranking university in northeast Thailand (Group C) were different. Within group C, although members were from the same program and university, most reported diverse perceptions, while some could not describe the syllabus design process at all. In fact, based on perceptions revealed, student teachers from all three universities displayed limited knowledge and understanding about the language syllabus design process.

According to the reformed EFL curriculum in Thailand, teachers are encouraged to explore different approaches to syllabus design and devise what they find appropriate for their classroom contexts, rather than blindly following the national standardized curriculum or acting as passive implementers of others' ideas (Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), 1999). Having a thorough understanding of the core components of the language syllabus design process would enable teachers to become independent in addressing the contextual constraints of the teaching and learning situation, and in designing a syllabus (Nunan, 1988; Nation, 1996; Atagi, 2002). However, the results suggest that student teachers do not recognize the importance of significant steps of the syllabus design process, namely: environmental assessment, principles application, and course evaluation (Nation, 1996; Graves, 2000). The only factor they seemed to perceive as important is the core curriculum. Other factors, such as time, class size, learner proficiency and needs, teacher experience, and recourse available as suggested by Nation (1996), were not mentioned in the focus group discussions. This implies that the student teachers see syllabus design as a centralized rather than decentralized process. In other words, they seem to perceive that a syllabus must be designed to correspond to the principles of a core curriculum, rather than reflect on and respond to local realities of classroom



contexts. The results coincide with Putri's (2016) study which addresses that, in implementing school-based curriculum, the Indonesian EFL teachers found the preparation of syllabus and lesson plan difficult because they did not understand well about it. Even novice teachers of English with a Ph.D. degree were found to have 'unrealistic expectations' about the teacher's role as course designer (Lee, 2016).

Based on the findings, there are some major recommendations I would like to propose. Firstly, teacher training should provide student teachers with more access and exposure to the major tenets of syllabuses and the syllabus design process. In addition, student teachers need to be equipped with supportive understanding and perception of their role as syllabus designers. Finally, they need to have sufficient hands-on training in developing and evaluating syllabuses for different classroom situations. Such training should be provided during coursework, and extend into the teaching practicum and initial years of their teaching career. In light of this, Nguyen (2016) suggests that "mentoring should become a core component of EFL teacher education rather than merely a practice during the teaching practicum". National policy makers, teacher trainers, and school teachers, should be aware of their role in supporting education reform policies. Strategic communication and collaboration will result in less divergence in perceptions, attitudes, and implementation of the reformed policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper demonstrates that, if the EFL educational reform policy is to be effectively implemented to improve English language teaching in Thailand, policy makers need to take a careful look at existing teacher training programs and their training strategies to ensure that they produce pre-service teachers who are well equipped with philosophical and procedural knowledge to help them to adapt to the reformed curriculum. Lastly, a limitation of this research is that it was

conducted in a short period of time using only one method, a focus group discussion. Future research into this topic is suggested to seek more detailed understanding of the situation through in-depth interviews or observation to see how perceptions of syllabus design are actualized in teaching practice.

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