

**SYLLABUS DESIGN & THE PROCESS OF WRITING A COURSE BOOK:
HOW THE TWO FACILITATE EACH OTHER MUTUALLY?**

An account of creating a course book for an EAP course at METU

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This paper focuses on the transformation of a speaking course offered by the Middle East Technical University (METU) Department of Modern Languages (DML) over the years and the steps taken to make that transformation possible, with the ultimate aim of shedding light onto the ways of the professionals who may plan on undertaking such a journey themselves. At the heart of this transformation is the production of our own materials, namely the course book titled *Academic Speaking Skills*: the process we followed, decisions we made, and materials we created. By sharing the experiences we gained in this process, we hope to encourage those who wish to create their own materials or course books to meet the specific needs of their students.

BACKGROUND

Department of Modern Languages offers four main EAP courses to METU undergraduate students throughout their studies in their departments from freshman to senior years. These courses are designed to equip our students with the essential language skills that they need to successfully carry on their departmental studies at an English-medium university. Academic Speaking Skills course, a must course offered to 2nd year students at METU, builds on top of the first year EAP courses and specifically focuses on speaking skills and presentation skills with the aim of helping students become more confident, autonomous, and competent

speakers of English. Since it was first offered in 1994, this course has shown tremendous transformation from a purely presentation skills course into a more dynamic academic speaking skills course. The ever-changing and ever-developing nature of this course eventually led to the production of the course book *Academic Speaking Skills* written by a small team of DML instructors in 2010.

WHAT INITIATED THE CHANGE?

Following a very comprehensive needs assessment study in 2003, METU School of Foreign Languages created its Curriculum Policy Document in May 2004, which shaped the curriculum implemented in the Department of Modern Languages to a great extent. However, in 2007-2008, there emerged a necessity to carry out a new needs analysis study with a specific focus on the speaking skill. Speaking was the specific focus of this study since it was the skill which did not receive enough attention and the one that most parties were unsatisfied about. Therefore, a research committee from the Department of Modern Languages conducted a needs analysis study to determine the needs of the undergraduate students at METU in connection with speaking English in their departments. Data were collected from 300 undergraduate students ranging from freshman to senior year students through a questionnaire. A similar questionnaire was administered to faculty members from 23 different departments and an interview was conducted with 6 instructors from five different faculties at METU. The results of this study showed that students were expected to perform tasks like “asking and answering questions”, “making presentations”, “participating in pair/group activities”, “expressing opinions”, “communicating with foreign instructors” etc. As for the problems that impede students’ performance in speaking English, the participants reported difficulty in remembering the right words when speaking, lack of self-confidence in speaking English, fear of making mistakes. The students who answered the questionnaire suggested that they needed more opportunities and time to practice speaking in

English in the Department of Basic English and in the courses offered by the Department of Modern Languages. The results obtained from the instructors who participated in the study were quite parallel to those obtained from the students. They reported that departments at METU require students to use English to effectively express their ideas, to make presentations in class, to participate in discussions, and to ask and answer questions. They also highlighted the importance of producing free-minded individuals who can question, synthesize, internalize and interpret things effectively, in other words, the importance of higher order thinking skills. Eventually, all of these results were put into use in redesigning the course books we had been using in the Department of Modern Languages.

Following the changes that took place in English 101 and English 102 course books, English 211 course book *Academic Speaking Skills* was written in 2010 with the purpose of creating a better match between our learners' needs and the materials we use in our courses. English 211 course was of significant importance in this respect since it was a course that specifically focused on the speaking skill.

THE INITIAL STAGES

I. NEEDS ANALYSIS: DML INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVE:

The changes in the curriculum document and the results of the needs analysis study conducted in 2008 necessitated a major renewal of the then existing English 211 course titled "Academic Presentation Skills". It was obvious from the needs analysis study that our learners needed more opportunities to improve and practice their speaking skills, which meant going beyond presentation skills. Since these results meant a total renewal of the existing syllabus and the course book, we decided that it would be best to involve the instructors of the Department of Modern Languages in the decision-making process in the early stages of recreating the course in question. To this end, another needs analysis study was carried out with DML instructors in 2009-2010 academic year by the 211 syllabus committee.

The syllabus committee designed a questionnaire consisting of three sections that asked for DML instructors' opinions regarding the speaking skills that needed to be addressed in the new syllabus, the strengths and weaknesses of the existing syllabus, and their suggestions for the new syllabus and the course book. A total of 36 DML instructors participated in the study and they provided valuable information which later helped shape the guiding principles for the new syllabus design. As a second step, 7 DML instructors, some of whom were instrumental in shaping the previous syllabi for the course in question, were interviewed.

The results of both the questionnaire and the interview highlighted three major issues to be addressed in the design of the new course book: task types, themes, and the balance between input and practice. Variety in task types was the most commonly stated concern. Although DML instructors were happy with the course in general, they felt the need for different speaking activities other than structured presentations. Most of them differentiated between presentations and other forms of speaking activities considering the latter to be more valuable in generating spontaneous language production as opposed to memorized speech. There was a consensus among the participating instructors that the new syllabus should focus more on fluency through a variety of interactive activities and provide opportunities for questioning ideas, expressing themselves, critical thinking, confidence building, creativity, and individuality. Figure 1 below shows the activities suggested by the DML instructors:

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| ▪ Debates | ▪ Pronunciation activities |
| ▪ Mini group and whole-class discussions | ▪ Asking and answering questions |
| ▪ Role-plays | ▪ Spontaneous dialogue or response activities |
| ▪ Critical thinking activities | ▪ Analysis and critique of a speech |
| ▪ Mini presentations | ▪ Watching movies and talking about them |
| ▪ Impromptu speech | |

Figure 1: Speaking activities suggested by MLD instructors

Apart from the lack of speaking activities, participating instructors also shared their concerns regarding the themes to be selected for the new course book. They highlighted the importance of choosing topics and themes which could have the potential to motivate students to speak more in English by using their own experiences and world knowledge. The topics' not getting worn out or outdated very soon was of great importance as well. The last concern related to the course book was the lack of balance between the amount of input in the book and the tasks to practice that input. This concern mainly stemmed from the fact that the currently used course book focused mostly on teaching presentation skills, which required a lot of lecturing leaving very little room for practice. Besides, the focus on presentations meant excluding the other language skills like listening, writing and reading. These three issues raised by DML instructors helped outline the core design principles of the book.

All in all, this study proved to be very useful in redesigning the Academic Presentation Skills course and turning it from a purely presentation skills course into a more comprehensive one that develops academic speaking skills on a broader level. All the insight provided by DML instructors based on their accumulated knowledge about METU students, DML course syllabi and the course materials, and the assessment procedures provided valuable help and guidance as well as encouragement for all the changes that took place later.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Discovering the needs of all the parties, especially those of the learners, gave us a major head start in the writing process of our course book. By then, we had a clear understanding of which skills to address in the book and how these skills should be treated. However, a thorough review of the literature and the analysis of the existing textbooks designed with a similar purpose were of significant importance to be able

to establish a solid framework for the book. The extensive research we carried out at this stage made substantial contribution to the formation of the guiding principles that governed the writing process. One such contribution was made by O'Neill who stated that "textbooks should be so designed and organized that a great deal of improvisation and adaptation by both teacher and class is possible" (1982, p. 107). This idea was instrumental in our effort to create a course book for flexible use so as to capitalize on teachers' creativity and discretion concerning the selection of activities to be done in class. Tomlinson (1998) and the principles he proposed for materials development contributed to the design of our course book. Of the fifteen principles he proposed, the following had the greatest impact on our decision-making process:

- Exposing learners to language in authentic use
- Providing learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes
- Providing opportunities for outcome feedback
- Arousing and sustaining the learners' curiosity and attention
- Stimulating intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement

Our decision to use mainly authentic materials was also inspired from Cunningsworth who emphasized the importance of such materials in bringing greater realism and relevance into the language classroom while increasing learner motivation (1995, p.66). Another major contribution was owed to Penny Ur's *Discussions That Work: Task-centered Fluency Practice* (1991), which was instrumental in helping us design activities that require the use of critical thinking skills while engaging learners in meaningful contexts where they can freely express their ideas and interact with each other.

All these sources mentioned above and many others not stated here happened to be the key factors in determining the major principles upon which our course book was

built. Combining the accumulated knowledge from the review of literature and the facts gathered through needs analyses facilitated our creative process profoundly.

III. DETERMINING THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

All the data collected from students, faculty members and DML instructors were analyzed to make decisions about the new syllabus design, thus the new course book to be written. (See **Appendix 2** for the new course design). It is of great importance to highlight that designing the syllabus and producing the course book were the two processes that went hand in hand and the decisions made for one had an influence on the decisions for the other. It was important to see the global picture and think about the course as a whole to create a course book that would meet the demands of all the parties involved. This decision-making process produced the following guiding principles which laid the foundation for the course book titled *Academic Presentation Skills*:

- **Thematic Units:** The purpose behind choosing different themes for each unit is to make sure that the course book appeals to the needs and interests of students from various backgrounds and disciplines. Since this is a course offered to all METU students studying in different fields like engineering, social and political sciences and education, the course material should revolve around themes that they may find relevant and interesting.
- **Integration of skills:** Although the main focus is on the speaking skill, reading, listening and writing are to be integrated to foster speaking in the classroom. Authentic reading texts and podcasts for listening are used to make learners familiar with the topics and concepts they are expected to speak about later in the unit. They serve as a catalyst and acquaint learners with the necessary vocabulary they may need to perform the speaking tasks that

follow. The writing skill is to be integrated in the form of reflection and self-evaluation assignments.

- **Emphasis on critical thinking skills:** Critical thinking skills are to be practiced and developed through discussion, debate, and self-evaluation tasks. Higher-order thinking skills should be addressed throughout the course book.
- **Increasing complexity both in terms of tasks & materials:** Building learners' confidence in speaking English is an issue that needs utmost attention. Starting with non-graded semi-formal small tasks and gradually moving towards more formal and academic tasks will help learners feel more confident in speaking English. Not all speaking activities should be graded.
- **Movement from teacher-led to student-led activities:** Learner autonomy should be encouraged and facilitated. Students should take responsibility for their own learning gradually as they move along the course and the instructors' role should be that of a facilitator. Students should be able to make their own decisions about the topics they want to work on, the way they organize the content of their presentations, and the roles they take in class activities. The aim is to help our students become more independent learners.
- **Variety in interaction patterns:** Opportunities for more student to student interaction should be created. The number of in-class activities that utilize group work and pair work should be increased. Meaningful contexts where students will feel the need to interact with each other in English should be created.
- **Variety in speaking tasks:** Students should be asked to perform different speaking tasks that help them develop various speaking skills and practice different language functions. By providing variety in speaking tasks, student boredom could be prevented and motivation might be increased. This also

provides learners with chances to test their skills in different contexts and to become better aware of the areas they need to work on to develop their speaking skills in English.

- **Learner-friendly tasks:** Short reading texts and listening pieces should be selected to decrease the time spent in class for these activities. Instead, more class time should be allocated for discussing the ideas or concepts presented in these materials. Students should be encouraged to voice their opinions rather than answering a lot of comprehension questions. Each reading text or listening piece should prepare the grounds for speaking practice, which as a result may increase student participation and decrease teacher-talking time.
- **Listening tasks in every unit:** Students should be exposed to English more through listening activities. This will enable them to develop their pronunciation and intonation skills as well as making them familiar with different speaking styles and accents. Authentic listening materials with different difficulty levels should be incorporated as much as possible.
- **Focus on pronunciation, stress & intonation:** Each unit should have a separate section focusing on pronunciation, stress and intonation patterns in English, following the principle of increasing complexity adopted throughout the book. The aim is to increase learners' awareness and help them notice their mistakes, which may eventually lead to correcting their mistakes and improving their accents and pronunciation.
- **A culminating activity at the end of each unit:** Each unit should end with a culminating activity which brings everything to a logical closure. These activities will be in the form of presentations given individually or as a group. These presentations should display increasing complexity in terms of their requirements for content, organization, timing, and the presentation skills students are expected to utilize. Guidance and feedback from the instructors

will be instrumental in the improvement of learners' presentation and speaking skills.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Having no similar book or course to inspire us, we started to design the course and the syllabus before writing the book and made our decisions along the process accordingly. We started out with studying School of Foreign Languages Curriculum Document to review the existing course objectives and to set new ones to meet the needs of all the parties. (See **Appendix 1**)

As writers, our next task was to determine the themes and design the units in the book. At this point, we chose themes that were staples of university courses and tried to address the various departments/faculties in our university. These considerations led to the selection of five themes that would turn into five units of our book: the mind, art, marketing, technology and science. To have a balance within the units, we included different aspects of each theme trying to offer a broader scope and depth. To be more precise, each and every material and activity in the units explored different aspects of a broad theme, yet working together meaningfully to provide learners with the necessary background to successfully perform the culminating activity at the end of each unit. Another criterion we had in mind in the selection of the themes was addressing the problem of topics' being worn out and outdated quickly. Thus we selected themes that had the potential to be explored independent of the constraints imposed by time, culture and context we live in.

After determining the themes, we started to collect materials. At this point we had two main concerns: using authentic materials and making them serve as a springboard to generate speaking. One of the biggest novelties the book offers to contribute the canon is the use of authentic podcasts as listening materials, which we believe to have a great impact on the improvement of both listening skills and the

language use of students by providing a unique model of real spoken English as opposed to the traditional listening materials tailored to students' language proficiency. We had a hard time finding suitable podcasts that were both relevant to our themes and needs, but the effort was well worth the outcome since podcasts we selected helped us determine and design most of the reading materials and speaking activities within the units. The authentic reading materials were selected from various genres and sources such as newspapers, blogs, websites, magazines etc. to expose students to a variety of texts that they would see in real life every day. Most importantly, we selected texts that were short, yet still capable of fostering discussion in class. The book, thus, does not treat reading as a skill but rather a medium for speaking.

The components of each unit were another straightforward decision we gave as we had a clear vision of the book by then. We tried to address all four skills in each unit and designed sections that we wanted to employ in all five units. Each unit in the book revolves around one single theme which is explored from different perspectives as the unit progresses with reading, listening and speaking tasks. The tasks and texts build upon each other both thematically and skills wise, and the units end with a major presentation assignment where students are expected to display their understanding and command of the theme and the skills focused on in the relevant unit. To this end, the book is designed around the following sections illustrated in Figure 2 below:

Reading and Listening sections at the beginning of each unit serve as springboard to provide the context for the speaking tasks to follow and help students generate ideas to participate in the speaking tasks such as debates, discussions, impromptu presentations, role plays and oral synthesis & oral report.

Talk About It section introduces the speaking tasks and assignments related to the themes explored in the reading and listening sections.

Going One Step Further section engages students in various major speaking tasks by bringing in different dimensions of the theme of the unit.

Speaking Help section provides the necessary language students need to complete the speaking tasks in the unit.

Sound of English section deals with the basics of English pronunciation, intonation and stress, along with various practice tasks.

Presentation Skills section provides the specific input for the presentation assignment at the end of each unit, ranging from building presentation confidence to designing appropriate visual aids.

Putting it All together section serves as a culminating task where students are expected to give a presentation either individually or in groups by synthesizing the tasks, skills, input and themes of the unit.

Figure 2: Sections of *Academic Speaking Skills*

Since most of the decisions were made in the pre writing and planning stage, the writing process was a relatively smooth one which mainly involved assigning objectives to the units, selecting the reading texts and podcasts, and designing the speaking and presentation tasks. Each unit was designed to build on top of the previous units in terms of the skills and tasks covered, without ignoring the importance of recycling those skills addressed previously in the book.

After completing a unit, we asked for feedback from a different group of instructors for each unit to provide a sense of ownership. We evaluated the feedback received and made the necessary revisions during the editing process.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOOK IN DML

We started using the book as of September 2010 and as book writers and the syllabus committee, we worked on the implementation of the book with our instructors by holding frequent meetings to provide guidance for classroom implementation. Since teaching and grading speaking was a major component of the new course, we held frequent standardization sessions which involved watching pre-recorded student performances, grading them with the rubrics specifically developed for the new course and ensuring the effective and standard use of the rubrics by the instructors. As the book and the course were totally new, we tried to provide continuous help and guidance to ensure a smooth transition from the former syllabus to the new one. This was crucial to make sure that all the principles that shaped the new course book and the course were communicated thoroughly to the instructors teaching the course.

EDITING & REVISING THE BOOK

As Tomlinson (2006) notes, there is no perfect course book, because each course book is used in different a situation by different students who have different objectives, needs, wants, proficiency level, and cultural background. Therefore, every course book needs to be evaluated in order to pinpoint its deficiencies and improve them. While teaching the book, we started asking for feedback for each unit from all the instructors teaching the course. We received very positive feedback both from the instructors and our students about the themes and the tasks involved. We have been using the book for more than three years now and learners and teachers continue to regard the book as a valuable source, and this has further been verified by the continuous increase in the number of universities in Turkey that teach our book in their faculties.

Since the beginning of this process, we have been flexible using the advantage of designing our own syllabus. Thus, rather than supplementing the first edition with extra materials or handouts, upon the feedback received and based on our own observations and experience as the book writers, we started editing and revising the book in 2011. Fortunately, there was no need to make drastic changes so we fine-tuned the materials, keeping the design, objectives and tasks as they were. The second edition of the book which was published a year later had four units instead of five as we decided to remove the last unit and blend some of its components into the fourth unit due to time concerns we experienced in the first year of teaching the book. We also added some more practice activities especially for presentation skills, namely the use of audio visual aids and literature research based on observing student performances and our teaching experience.

All in all, writing a course book has been a very fulfilling and unique experience, giving us the opportunity to cater for our students' and departments' needs and contributing the canon by addressing a niche. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues in The Department of Modern Languages for the outstanding support they have given us over the years and we hope *Academic Speaking Skills* will be an inspiration to course book writers, curriculum developers and teachers like us.

*****Additions to be made**

Appendix 1: course goals and objectives

Appendix 2: 211 new course design

Richards' cyclical course design importance to be added!!