

**Practices of Designing English Program Syllabi  
at a Regional University in Vietnam**

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**Abstract.** Examining the current practices of designing course curricula and syllabi is essential for the success of any undertaking to restructure a training program. This study employs descriptive research design to investigate the current practices of drafting English course syllabi of twelve English instructors at five different tertiary educational institutions of Thai Nguyen University, a key regional educational center of Vietnam. Results from the study show typical problems in the practices of drafting curricula and syllabi in general and of designing intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks of these educators in particular, from which suggestions and recommendations will be given to ensure the successful design of any incoming instructional plans in the light of Outcomes-based Education.

**Key words:** Practices, Designing Course Syllabi, Outcomes-Based Education, Vietnam

**Introduction**

The process of regional and international integration and competition is challenging most developing countries including Vietnam to make a breakthrough in all fields in which renovations and improvements in education, particularly English language education are considered an urgent need to help the country produce competent global citizens. Renovating the English language education requires changes in many aspects such as rethinking the outcomes of English language education, restructure English training program into Outcomes-based Education (OBE), redesigning the curricula, syllabi and materials, improving teachers' competences and alternating outdated assessment and evaluation, among others.

To design or restructure a training program, it is essential that all training courses and curricula are guided by or matched with explicit statements of expected student learning outcomes which are clearly stated in course syllabi. Since they provide information on important components of a course such as course description, learning outcomes, topics and activities, assignments and types of assessment, detailed teaching schedule, classroom policies and values and many others, course syllabi work like a roadmap with directions for successfully arriving at the intended learning outcomes.

Le (2015) claims in a study that the teaching and learning of English at tertiary level in Vietnam are largely based on coursebooks which are written in native-speaking countries like the UK or the US without being based on students' needs analysis. He also further emphasizes that the teachers were forced to "stick" to the coursebooks as the core curriculum without being trained to adapt them in their context, to eliminate irrelevant cultural aspects and to fit students' expectations and proficiency levels.

At Thai Nguyen University (TNU), a key regional university of Vietnam comprising of ten college and university members, English faculty here has their own freedom to select materials and design training curriculum for their teaching. As an observation, many teachers here have a habit of designing their teaching syllabi basing entirely on the tables of contents of imported textbooks written in native English speaking contexts such as New English File, New Headway, English Unlimited, New Cutting Edge, to name a few. Some teachers even claim that due to the limited allotment of only 7 to 10 credits which are equivalent to 100 to 150 hours for English study during the entire four-year bachelor programs, teachers have to rush to

cover all the contents of their one or even two course-books of elementary and pre-intermediate levels. Such practices of designing English program syllabi without considering local factors such as students' levels and learning styles, teachers' strengths, stakeholders' needs, the rush teaching of inauthentic contents and students' inability for self-studying have not helped students master the language to the required level of expectation which is clearly shown in the very high ratio of students failing the English proficiency exams, that is not to mention the problematic nature of these exams.

Therefore, it is essential that the university leaders and educators should look into the current practices of designing English training programs here so that necessary changes will be made to renovate and restructure the training programs successfully.

### Methods

The research employed the descriptive method to find out educator respondents' current practices of drafting English program syllabi at Thai Nguyen University. The respondents of this study were 12 English teachers who were in charge of designing the English syllabi at five tertiary educational institutions of Thai Nguyen University namely TNU of Education, TNU of Sciences, TNU of Information and Technology, TNU of Medicine and Pharmacy, and TNU of Agriculture and Forestry.

The research instrument used in the study is a questionnaire with four parts consisting of the respondents' general practices in Curriculum/ Syllabus Design and Selection of Materials, practices in designing course outcomes, in designing teaching and learning activities and in designing assessment tasks in the light of OBE in Vietnam using the Likert's scale rating.

The data gathered were described statistically using mean and standard deviation for educators' practices of designing English program syllabi.

### Results and Discussion

The following are findings and interpretation of the data with supported research results and evidences.

#### General Practices in Curriculum/ Syllabus Design and Selection of Materials

Table 1 presents the findings on general practices of curriculum/ syllabus design and choice of teaching resources by English educators at five different college members of Thai Nguyen University. It is evident that the teacher-respondents **strongly agree** on three aspects to consider when drafting the syllabus namely: the availability of resource materials, the MOET's educational framework, and the required level of English proficiency for students upon graduation with the means of 3.50, 3.42 and 3.25 respectively. The finding is further confirmed by the response in the Focus Group Discussion (Nguyen, 2018) that "*Up till now, we are not able to design our own textbooks yet, so we still have to rely on course-books designed by foreign experts*". Besides, educational curricula at Thai Nguyen University, like those of other state schools and universities in Vietnam, have to follow the curriculum framework set by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Nguyen, 2003).

However, the teachers **disagree** that doing students' needs analysis and investigating stakeholders' needs are their frequent practices when designing English curriculum and syllabus with the means of 2.33 and 2.17 respectively. The findings find affirmation in a research conducted by Phan (2015) that a top-down management approach of higher education curriculum has limited participation and exclusion of other stakeholders, for example, students and employers from the process of curriculum development. These situations show a common but inadequate practice among English course designers in Vietnam since according to Johns (1991) as quoted by Richards (2002), the needs analysis is the first step in course design and it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. Therefore, it has a vital role in

the process of designing and carrying out any language course and is considered as a crucial component of systematic curriculum development. The instructors' Guide to Course Design (2016) developed by Biggs and Tang (2011) also confirms that among others, "the practices of course syllabus design begin with investigating student needs to collect information about students like who they are, what skills/ knowledge they need to learn, how can they demonstrate these competencies, what kinds of learning opportunities and assessment tasks would suit them".

In other aspects, English educators at TNU all **agree** on considering their institutional context and settings, based on the opinion and order of school's board of managers or department head and consulting syllabi and choices of materials from other famous higher institutions of the country and the region when designing their curricula. Overall, English educators at five TNU institutions agree with the average mean of 2.93 that they share common practices in drafting English curriculum and selection of materials.

**Table 1. General practices on syllabus design and selection of materials**

Statements	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I do a needs analysis to seek for students' background knowledge, learning styles, motivations, preferences and expectations before designing course curriculum.	2.33	0.48	Disagree
2. I consider the availability of resource materials when drafting the syllabus.	3.50	1.24	Strongly Agree
3. I consider context and settings for learning as a basis for designing course syllabus.	3.08	1.59	Agree
4. I investigate stakeholders' needs in developing my course for students.	2.17	0.35	Disagree
5. The MOET's educational framework affects my school's choice of syllabus.	3.42	1.18	Strongly Agree
6. The selection of teaching materials and resources are based on the opinion and order of school's board of managers or department head.	2.83	0.74	Agree
7. I consult syllabi and choices of materials from other famous higher institutions of the country and the region.	2.83	0.88	Agree
8. The students' required level of English proficiency upon graduation affect my choice of textbooks and teaching materials.	3.25	0.93	Strongly Agree
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.93</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>Agree</b>

**Legend:**

3.25 – 4.00 Strongly Agree

2.50 – 3.24 Agree

1.75 – 2.49 Disagree

1.00 – 1.74 Strongly Disagree

**Practices in Designing Course Outcomes**

The practices in designing course outcomes are shown in table 2. As revealed from the results, English instructors at TNU **agree** that the can-do statements in the MOET's six-level of Foreign Language Proficiency Framework have strong influence on their written course objectives with a mean of 2.92. This claim is further explained by Le (2013) in a research on English language teaching in Vietnam general and tertiary education that with the decision 1400 by the Prime Minister approving the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP 2020), the national foreign language education programs will be designed according to the MOET's six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework.

However, English course designers at TNU **disagree** that they “*link the school’s vision and mission with the course objectives*” and “*the Bloom’s taxonomy serves as the basis for my writing of intended learning outcomes*” with the weighted means of 2.42 and 2.33 respectively. The results are proven by the evidence in a research by Nguyen (2018) that all the syllabi designed by five different TNU institutions do not mention any information related to the schools’ visions and missions with the mean of 1.0 with an interpretation of “Beginning” in the syllabus evaluation results. Besides, four out of the five schools-respondents 1, 2, 3 and 5 have learning objectives stated in general with vague and immeasurable terms which cannot lend themselves to measurement and seek higher levels of learning, as reflected in different levels of thinking skills in Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Therefore, these findings raise an issue for any proposed syllabus design to tackle well in order to produce a better instructional plan.

**Table 2. Practices in designing course outcomes**

Statements	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. The can-do statements in the MOET’s six-level of Foreign Language Proficiency Framework are determinants of my course objectives.	2.92	0.88	Agree
2. I describe specific teaching objectives in the syllabus.	3.08	0.93	Agree
3. I try to link the school’s vision and mission with course objectives.	2.42	0.56	Disagree
4. The Bloom’s taxonomy serves as the basis for my writing of intended learning outcomes.	2.33	0.76	Disagree
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>2.78</b>	<b>Agree</b>

**Legend:**

3.25 – 4.00 Strongly Agree

2.50 – 3.24 Agree

1.75 – 2.49 Disagree

1.00 – 1.74 Strongly Disagree

**Practices in Designing Teaching and Learning Activities**

It can be gleaned from table 3 that there is a **strong agreement** on similar practices in designing teaching and learning activities shared among all teacher-respondents at five HEIs of TNU. It seems to be a strong conflict between perception and actual practice of TNU educators when they claim that ‘the TLAs basing strictly on textbooks in the syllabus does not encourage my teaching for “apply”, creativity, problem-based and lifelong learning” with a mean of 3.25 and an interpretation of **Strongly Agree** while in reality, they also **strongly agree** that “*the teaching schedules we use are copies of the textbooks’ tables of contents*” and they “*follow the order of the textbooks to sequence my teaching activities (TLAs)*” with the means of 3.25 and 3.33 respectively. This phenomenon is supported by Phan (2015) in an interview with English instructors at a Vietnamese university that “the existing curriculum was textbook-based, i.e, textbooks were selected beforehand and curriculum was developed accordingly ... these textbooks became compulsory: as an unwritten rule, teachers had to follow all the steps proposed, and to cover all the content presented in these textbooks”.

**Table 3. Practices in designing teaching and learning activities**

Statements	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. The teaching schedules we use are copies of the textbooks' tables of contents	3.25	1.26	Strongly Agree
2. I follow the order of the textbooks to sequence my teaching activities (TLAs)	3.33	1.23	Strongly Agree
3. I supplement abundant extra materials in teaching beside textbook's activities.	3.17	0.89	Agree
4. I think the TLAs basing strictly on textbooks in the syllabus doesn't encourage my teaching for "apply", creativity, problem-based and lifelong learning.	3.25	1.03	Strongly Agree
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.25</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>

**Legend:**

3.25 – 4.00 Strongly Agree

2.50 – 3.24 Agree

1.75 – 2.49 Disagree

1.00 – 1.74 Strongly Disagree

**Practices in Designing Assessment Tasks**

Table 4 shows the practices in designing assessment tasks of the English course syllabus developers at TNU. Like the process of selecting teaching materials and designing English programs, the teacher respondents are in **agreement** that the types of assessment are also advised or determined by boards of managers (school leaders or department heads) with a mean of 2.75. This finding implies that the authority of the managerial board spares little room for teachers' autonomy in designing the types of curricula or assessment tasks that suit their classroom teaching.

Moreover, they **strongly agree** that assessment tasks are designed based on the format of Cambridge English Tests level A2 or B1 that their students have to take as a requirement for graduation. The finding shows a compliance of each institution to the policy of Thai Nguyen University on foreign language proficiency requirements stated in document 758/TB-DHTN dated on 18th June 2014 by TNU director (TNU project, 2013).

When asked to choose the steps in designing English course syllabus, 5 or 42 percent of the respondents claim that they decide on topics of teaching and learning and teaching activities first, then identify learning outcomes and finally design assessment tasks. On the contrary, 4 or 33 percent of the instructors identify learning outcomes as their first step, followed by other activities of deciding on topics of teaching and means of assessing students. Notably, 3 or 25 percent of the teachers claim to decide on forms of assessment first before designing learning outcomes and topics of teaching.

This result can be understood that due to the lack of professional training on curriculum development as shown in their profile background, the English instructors at TNU have not yet mastered the sufficient understanding of course syllabus design process underpinned in a very basic concept of Outcomes-based Education, that is, as posited by Harden (2002), education should start with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organizing curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens.

**Table 4. Practices in designing assessment tasks**

Statements	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. The types of assessment of my syllabus are determined by boards of managers (school leaders or department heads)	2.75	0.90	Agree
2. The assessment tasks are designed based on the format of Cambridge Tests level A2 or B1 that my students have to take as a requirement of graduation.	3.42	1.24	Strongly Agree
3. My GEP syllabus reflects different assessment tasks to evaluate students' performance such as invigilated exam of written and spoken tests, the portfolios, projects, reflective journals, self and peer assessment rubrics, etc. I know exactly about different types of assessment, i.e, direct/ indirect, qualitative/ quantitative, formative/ summative assessment.	2.17	0.64	Disagree
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.78</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>Agree</b>

**Legend:**

3.25 – 4.00 Strongly Agree

2.50 – 3.24 Agree

1.75 – 2.49 Disagree

1.00 – 1.74 Strongly Disagree

**Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

English instructors of TNU generally showed strong agreement in practices in designing TLAs, followed by level of agreement in three other aspects namely general practices on curriculum/ syllabus design and selection of materials, practices in designing assessment tasks and in constructing CILOs. Specifically:

Regarding the general practices in Curriculum/ Syllabus Design and Selection of Materials, English educators strongly agree on three aspects to consider when drafting the syllabus namely: the availability of resource materials, the MOET's educational framework, and the required level of English proficiency for students upon graduation with the means. However, the teachers disagree that doing students' needs analysis and investigating stakeholders' needs are their frequent practices when designing English curriculum and syllabus.

With reference to the practices in designing course outcomes, English instructors at TNU agree that the can-do statements in the MOET's six-level of Foreign Language Proficiency Framework have strong influence on their written course objectives. Whereas, they did not have habit of linking the school's vision and mission with the course objectives" and "the Bloom's taxonomy did not serve as the basis for the writing of intended learning outcomes.

In terms of practices for designing Teaching and Learning Activities, English instructors at TNU strongly agree that 'the TLAs basing strictly on textbooks in the syllabus does not encourage the teaching for "apply", creativity, problem-based and lifelong learning". However, in reality, they also strongly agree that "the teaching schedules we use are copies of the textbooks' tables of contents" and they "follow the order of the textbooks to sequence my teaching activities (TLAs)"

The teacher respondents are in agreement that the types of assessment are also advised or determined by boards of managers (school leaders or department heads). This finding

implies that the authority of the managerial board spares little room for teachers' autonomy in designing the types of curricula or assessment tasks that suit their classroom teaching.

Moreover, they strongly agree that assessment tasks are designed based on the format of Cambridge English Tests level A2 or B1 that their students have to take as a requirement for graduation.

Finally, when asked to choose the steps in designing English course syllabus, a majority of the respondents claim that they decide on topics of teaching and learning and teaching activities first, then identify learning outcomes and finally design assessment tasks.

### **Recommendations**

In the light of findings gathered in the study, the researcher hereby recommends that to ensure the successful restructuring of training programs towards OBE standards at TNU in particular and in Vietnam in general, there should be some changes in the practices of drafting the English program syllabi as follows:

Needs analyses of students' English language levels and learning styles, and stakeholders' needs should be done before drafting any training programs.

There should be a constructive alignment in drafting the intended learning outcomes of the course level to those of program and institutional levels so as to contribute produce competent graduate attributes of the university.

Bloom's taxonomy of critical thinking skills is recommended for faculty members to incorporate active verbs that reflect critical or higher order thinking in drafting the intended learning outcome statements.

Since the TLAs basing strictly on textbooks in the syllabus does not encourage the teaching for "apply", creativity, problem-based and lifelong learning", English instructors should not follow the foreign textbooks' table of contents strictly but incorporate various different activities with authentic materials of the local communities to the existing materials.

In designing any training curricula or syllabus, it is essential that instructors should identify learning outcomes first and then decide on topics of teaching and learning and teaching activities and assessment tasks that match with ILOs.

All in all, appropriate training regarding the English curriculum design and development in the light of Outcomes-based Education should be given to all English educators so that they can produce better instructional plans.

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