Evaluating task-based syllabus for EFL learners

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Abstract*: This research is an evaluation of the effectiveness of task-based syllabus on EFL learners' language competence at a private university in Vietnam educational context. This research resorts to questionnaire survey, semi-structured interview, and pretest and posttest as instruments for data collection. The research findings revealed that a strength of the current task-based syllabus is the match between lesson topics and students' expectations. However, the syllabus still created difficulties for students including insufficient vocabulary, unfamiliar structures, and lack of life knowledge. The effect of teaching with task-based syllabus on students' language performance is also reflected through a significant difference in mean scores between the pretest and the posttest. This research provides an insight into the effectiveness of English teaching through task-based syllabus at a private university in Vietnam setting. It implies to teachers that they need to be sustainable change catalysts for more interesting syllabus for learners.*

Keywords: *task-based syllabus; task-based instruction; EFL learners; evaluation; Vietnam*

Introduction

English has been becoming incrementally crucial and popular along with the growth of international relations in numerous aspects of life. It has been becoming the most "common language of foreign trade and international communication" (Le, 2004, p. 5) for many nations the world over. The more crucial English has become, the more people desire to acquire it and the more attention has been paid to teaching of English.

The two past decades in Vietnam have witnessed dramatic transformations in English teaching and learning. Since it participated in ASEAN, Vietnam has been "listed as one of the expanding circle of countries where English is taught and learned as a foreign language" (Tran, 2000, p. 27). Thanks to "open-door" and "integration" policies, English teaching has been

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thriving. English has been integrated into the curriculum at all educational levels from primary to tertiary as a focal foreign language for globalization. In satisfying students' needs for English study, countless course books, textbooks, and reference books for English learning have been launched, which engenders confusion for teachers as well as students to make a choice. Several universities in Ho Chi Minh City including Saigon Technology University (STU) have faced this problem. Circumspect evaluation, selection, and adaptation have been conducted to ensure the matches between materials and the English program, learning styles, and teaching styles. There have existed some empirical studies on the selection, evaluation, and development of English teaching syllabus in Vietnam educational landscape such as Duong's (2004) research on the evaluation of the English language syllabus for students of business administration, Cao's (2005) research on the appraisal of English language syllabus for Finance and Accounting majors, and Ha's (2006) research on the assessment of English language syllabus for civil engineering students. Nonetheless, the syllabi appraised in these empirical studies were based on communicative approach or even grammar-translation approach, which leaves the area of task-based syllabus evaluation to remain under-researched and builds the motivation for this research.

Saigon Technology University (STU) has shifted from traditional form-focused and teacher-centered approach to task-based instruction (TBI) as an innovative approach which is based on communicative tasks (Nunan, 2004). It is consonant with Salimi et al.'s (2012) research which offered task-based approach to language teaching and syllabus design as the remedy to methodology and design problems in EFL settings. This research aims to evaluate task-based syllabus being used at this university. The three questions guiding this research encompass:

(1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current task-based syllabus?

(2) What difficulties do students and teachers face in the use of the syllabus?

(3) To what extent does the current task-based syllabus influence students' language competence?

1. Literature review

1.1 Task-based instruction (TBI)

Task-based instruction centers on the two-way exchange of information on real-life topics (Lee, 2002). The origin of task-based instruction within second language acquisition and communicative language teaching research is pinpointed (Skehan, 2003). Task-based instruction has been adopted in several English language curricula through Asian countries. Nonetheless, according to Foster (2009), empirical support would be illuminating for assumptions about task-based language learning. Butler (2011) pinpointed challenges linked with the adoption of task-based language teaching in Asian classrooms notwithstanding its popularity. The first challenge refers to conceptual constraints such as misconceptions on task-based language teaching and conflicts with local values. The second challenge resides with classroom-level constraints such as teacher-related and student-related factors, availability of resources, and classroom management practices. And the last challenge relates to societal-institutional level constraints including curricula and examination systems. Butler's (2011) research provides pedagogical implications such as utilizing more contextually feasible and flexible interpretations of task-based language teaching and building communities of learning inside as well as outside the classroom. Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) emphasize the role of task-based language teaching as a powerful method to optimize language learning and teaching, explicate benefits and challenges of task-based language teaching as well as teacher and learner roles in task-based language teaching. Chun, Zhao, and Wang (2011) reported that learners reacted positively to the online task-based language teaching, which yielded high learning performance of the students at the end of the semester.

1.1.1 What is task?

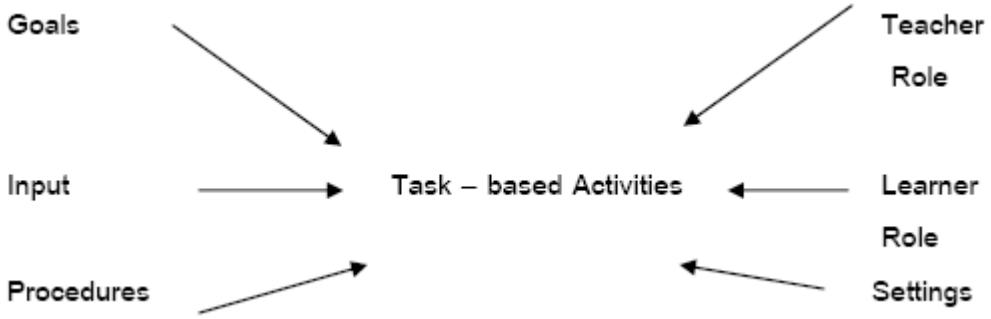
Tasks are deemed to be tools providing learners with the data they need for learning (Ellis, 2000). According to Gholami and Moghaddam (2013), "the tasks have a strong motivational power since they make the language learning process meaningful". Task is defined by Ellis (2003) as

> … a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes. (p. 16)

1.1.2 Task Components

There are two task typologies: real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks (Nunan, 1989) in which "pedagogical tasks are based on SLA theory and are designed to trigger second language learning processes and strategies" (Richards, 2001, p.162). From Nunan's (2004) view, the following components should be looked at when designing a task: goals, input, procedures, teacher role, learner role and setting (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Task components (Nunan, 2004)



Willis (1996, pp. 149-154) depicts six types of tasks commonly designed in English books, such as listing, sorting and ordering, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences and storytelling, and creative tasks.

1. Listing tasks: in these tasks, students may need to brainstorm to form a list of things they need to prepare for a business meeting.
2. Sorting and ordering: in these tasks, sequencing items, actions or events, categorizing and classifying items are performed. For instance, students may be asked to sequence steps of a business meeting or a wedding according to Vietnamese culture.
3. Comparing: in these tasks, students may be asked to find similarities and differences. For instance, students involve themselves in comparing two ads of DHL to find the differences between the old ad and the new ad to discern the new value DHL wants to propose to customers.

4. Problem solving: in these tasks, students may need to resolve a real life problem, such as addressing complaints from a client in the hotel or writing in response to complaint letter from a consumer goods customer.
5. Sharing personal experiences or storytelling: in these tasks, students take these chances to recollect their personal memories such as childhood or first love, and share with their team members.
6. Creative tasks: in these tasks, students are encouraged to exhibit their creativity, for instance, through designing their own garden or house.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 162) display five pedagogical tasks including (1) jigsaw tasks, (2) information-gap tasks, (3) problem–solving tasks, (4) decision-making tasks, and (5) opinion-exchange tasks.

1. Jigsaw tasks: in these tasks, learners integrate pieces to form up the whole, for instance, some learners may have three different parts of a painting and combine them into a complete painting.
2. Information-gap tasks: in these tasks, one student or group has a part of a set of information that the other does not have and vice versa. They need to exchange and explore what they do not have to accomplish the task.
3. Problem–solving tasks: in these tasks, students are assigned a problem and invited to come up with a solution (normally a single one) to the problem.
4. Decision-making tasks: in these tasks, students are also assigned a problem but invited to decide on one solution among several potential alternatives.
5. Opinion-exchange tasks: in these tasks, students are invited to immerse themselves in exchange of opinions and views without having to arrive at consensus.

1.2 Task-based syllabus

1.2.1. Syllabus

Syllabus is viewed as "a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learned" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991). In the same vein, Ur (1996, p. 176) defines syllabus as "a document which consists, essentially, of a list. This list specifies all the things that are to be

taught in the course(s) for which the syllabus was designed." Cunningsworth (1995) views a coursebook as a syllabus, alleging that "course books have multiple roles in ELT … and can serve as a syllabus that reflects learning objectives which have already been determined at the beginning of the book" (p. 7).

Hutchinson and Waters (1991) pinpoint the ensuing roles of a syllabus:

- The syllabus provides a practical premise for the division of appraisal, textbook and learning time.
- A syllabus also gives moral support to the teacher and learner in that it makes the language learning task appear manageable.
- A syllabus also has a cosmetic role.
- The syllabus can be viewed as a statement of projected routes, so that teacher and learner not merely have an idea of where they are going, but how they might get there.
- A syllabus is an implicit statement of perspectives on the nature of language and learning. A syllabus will normally be expressed in terms of what is taken to be the most important facet of language learning. A syllabus, then tells the teacher and the learners not purely what to be learnt, but implicitly why it is to be learnt.
- A syllabus provides a set of criteria for the selection of materials and/or writing. It defines the kinds of texts to look for or produce the items to focus on in exercises, etc.
- Uniformity is a crucial condition of any institutionalized activity, such as education. It is deemed to be important that standards within a system are as equal as possible. A syllabus is one way in which standardization is attained (or at least tried).
- A syllabus provides a visible basis for testing.

1.2.2. Syllabus typologies

Krahnke (1994) categorizes syllabi into six typologies, commencing with the syllabus based most on language structure and ending with the syllabus based most on language use. Epstein and Ormiston (2007) cluster syllabi into six typologies as in Table 1.

Table 1. Epstein and Ormiston's (2007) syllabus typologies

Syllabus typology	Premise of syllabus	Sequencing of topics
Structural syllabus	Based on grammar and phonological structures	Organized around grammatical points, sequenced from simple to complex structures, or from more frequently to less frequently used structures
Situational syllabus	Based on the perspective that language is encountered in situations or contexts	Sequenced according to student likelihood of encountering the situation (structures embedded in the situation)
Functional syllabus	Based on functions necessitated to participate in society	Sequenced by sense of the usefulness of the functions, the most useful taught first (structures and/or situations embedded within the functions)
Topical syllabus	Analogous to situational syllabi, predicated on topics or themes selected as relevant to a particular student group	Sequenced according to student likelihood of encountering the situation (grammatical points embedded within the topics)
Skill-based syllabus	Based on skills which students necessitate to use language	Sequenced by sense of usefulness of the skill to students
Task-based syllabus	Based on tasks and activities	Sequenced by sense of usefulness of the task to students

(Source: Epstein and Ormiston, 2007, p. 16)

1.2.3 Task-based syllabus

Dadashpour (2011) views syllabus as the heart of any educational program. According to Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012), "traditional procedures for syllabus design entailed the selection and sequencing of integrated linguistic features like grammar and vocabulary as well as notions, functions, and topics". However, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) also cited Baleghizadeh's (2008) perspective that these approaches to syllabus design fail to meet learners' communicative needs, and reflect the misrepresenting of the second language acquisition process as linear. The latest

endeavour to deal with the process of language teaching and learning, according to Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012), is the task-based syllabus. From White's (1988) view, curriculum comprises Type A Curriculum and Type B Curriculum. Type A Curriculum has structural syllabus with a graded list of items which are taught one by one, whereas Type B Curriculum provides learners with tasks to utilize their language experientially. Task-based syllabus therefore pertains to Type B Curriculum. Task-based syllabus is also differentiated from conventional syllabus in that task-based syllabus introduces a focus on form into a meaning-centered curriculum while conventional syllabus encompasses themes and topics, text types, vocabulary items, language structures, functions, and macro-skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) (Richards and Rogers, 2001).

Long (1985) sees need analysis as the starting point in a task-based syllabus since task-based syllabus is built on "an analysis of human learning in general and/or second language in particular" (Nunan, 1989, p. 55). Furthermore, Skehan and Foster (2001) look at the following issues in designing task-based syllabus: task difficulty, impacts of task difficulty and task conditions, the sequencing of tasks, the measures of three dimensions of task performance, and the measures of task difficulty. Among the three elements – task complexity, task conditions, and task difficulty – according to Robinson (2003), complexity differentials should be the crucial premise for task sequencing in task-based syllabus.

2. Methodology

The preceding section has reviewed the theoretical background behind the constructs "task-based instruction" and "task-based syllabus". This section presents the research approach utilized in the research as well as participants, instruments, and data collection procedure.

2.1 Research approaches

For the research questions to be dealt with, a questionnaire survey on both students and teachers was conducted, since survey "can be used to answer any research questions that require exploration, description, or explanation of people's characteristics, attitudes, views, and opinions" (Brown, 2001).

Nevertheless, diverse approaches tend to be adopted in the same research so as to compile a complete painting of the activity. Furthermore, the use of a variety of data collection approaches

enhances validation. This study therefore combined quantitative approach with qualitative approach since quantitative approach does not enable an analysis of the most profound level of the constructs (Luu, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Even though Seliger and Shohamy (1997, p. 18) indicate that qualitative research involves a variety of means to collate data, this research resorted to merely interview instrument.

2.2 Sampling

The participants in this research comprise 439 second-year students who have studied the task-based syllabus based on the English book "Widgets" (Benevides and Valvona, 2008) in the last semester from September 17 2012 to December 22 2012, and twelve EFL teachers who have taught these students.

The student population in this empirical study at the time of data collection is 1,382 second-year students at Saigon Technology University (STU) in diverse majors including Business Administration, Accounting, Information Technology, Food Chemistry, Telecommunications, Electronic Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Civil Engineering. Using non-probability sampling method, also called convenience or availability sampling method (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001), one English class from each major was selected to form the student sample of 439 second-year students.

Among the student sample, there were nine students (2.05%) from 19 to 20 years of age, 380 students (86.56%) from 21-22, and 50 students (11.39%) from 23-26; and 137 male (31.21%) and 302 female (68.79%). The teacher sample consisted of two teachers (16.67%) from 25 to 29 years of age, six teachers (50%) from 30 to 40, and four teachers (33.33%) from 41 upwards. Eight out of twelve teachers (66.67%) were female. Among the teachers, two held BA degree, four held MA degree, five were studying for MA degree, and one was studying for PhD degree, which is the strength of the teacher sample. The teachers also exhibited teaching experience as their strength. One teacher (8.33%) had under one-year teaching length, three teachers (25%) had from one to under five years of teaching experience, three teachers (25%) from five to under 10 years, and five teachers (41.67%) from 10 years upwards.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Questionnaire

From Brown and Rodgers's (2002) view, questionnaires are "any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which students react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers" (p. 6). This data collection instrument was used since it is less time-consuming in garnering as well as processing data from a number of respondents. Nonetheless, a potential disadvantage of questionnaire is low response rate; thus, so as to increase response rate, the researcher visited the class, delivered and explained items to students. The responses to questionnaires were collated instantly upon completion.

To ensure students' comprehension, Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was administered to 452 students from nine second-year classes at Saigon Technology University during the last week of the course. 439 responses were collected in completed form (97.12%). The questionnaire comprised two sections (see Appendix), the first of which was to determine the students' profiles or background information such as age, gender, place in which they went to high school, length of English learning, and extra English courses at foreign language centers. The second section of the questionnaire served to obtain data as regards student needs, overall syllabus evaluation, and detailed syllabus evaluation. Among these three aspects, "overall syllabus evaluation" and "detailed syllabus evaluation" are two evaluation approaches Cunningsworth (1995) refers to as "an impressionistic overview" of the material and "an in-depth examination" of the units of the material.

The "student needs" aspect seeks to explore what language skills students want to study through the English course (Question 1), how lesson topics in the syllabus match students' expectation (Question 2), and difficulties students face during the study (Question 3).

In the "overall syllabus evaluation" aspect of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to skim the strengths and weaknesses of the coursebook, including decoration and sequencing of topics (Question 4), general view on the effectiveness of the coursebook (Question 5), and learners' overall satisfaction with the coursebook (Question 6).

The "detailed syllabus evaluation" aspect of the questionnaire aims to investigate students' appraisal towards the difficulty and complexity level of the tasks in the syllabus (Question 7) and how interesting the tasks are (Question 8). The questionnaire winds up with an open-ended question which explores from the students which parts of the syllabus are unnecessary, need to be changed or supplemented.

2.3.2 Interview

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in teachers' room in an informal atmosphere, with individual teachers at any time when they were free, even at the break-time of the class meeting. Each interview did not last more than 45 minutes. There are four questions guiding these semi-structured interviews. The first question explored teachers' overall evaluation of the current task-based syllabus based on the English book "Widgets" (Benevides and Valvona, 2008) in terms of how attractive and lucid the layout is, quality of visuals, how tasks are sequenced, and so on. The second question sought the evaluation of teachers on the content, topics, and tasks. The third question appraised the quality of tasks on language skills. The fourth question asked teachers to display their perspectives on how to improve the current syllabus.

2.3.3 Tests

The last set of instrument utilized in the research was pretest and posttest. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the course, while the posttests were given upon completion of the course. The effect of task-based syllabus on students' language performance was explored through the divergence in the students' test scores between the pretest and posttest after 14-week teaching with task-based syllabus.

The pretest and posttest had the same task-based format. To eradicate the researcher's potential bias and ensure the objectivity of the results of posttest, the researcher invited her colleagues to mark the posttests of the students in both groups; and the results were delivered back to the researcher.

2.3.4 Data collection procedure

As previously indicated, the pretest was conducted on second-year students from the nine classes of different departments at Saigon Technology University during the first week of the course from September 17 2012 to September 22 2012. At the end of the last week, the students in all these nine classes took posttest which served to appraise the progress in language competence of the students who had been instructed with task-based syllabus in comparison with the pretest results. The questionnaire was distributed to each of these nine classes during the last week of the course by the researcher who clarified and replied to any questions that the students raised relating to the items in the questionnaire so that misconceptions from the students could be

minimized. It took students less than 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers were also implemented during the last week.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 Findings from the questionnaire survey

3.1.1 Findings from the "student needs" dimension of the questionnaire

Findings from the first question in the questionnaire survey reveal that through the English course, students wish to improve their vocabulary (431 students – 98.18%), grammar (438 students – 99.77%), listening skill (422 students – 96.13%), speaking skill (434 students – 98.86%), reading skill (439 students – 100%), and writing skill (314 students – 71.53%).

Question 2 in the questionnaire, which examines how lesson topics in the syllabus match students' expectation, denotes that most students viewed lesson topics as good matches to their expectations (327 students – 74.49%). Nonetheless, 83 students (18.91%) alleged that topics in the syllabus fairly meet their expectations, and 29 students (6.61%) claimed that topics slightly meet their expectations.

Responses to question 3 indicate that difficulties students face during the study encompass: lack of vocabulary (433 students – 98.63%), unfamiliar structures (381 students – 96.79%), and lack of life knowledge (295 students – 67.20%).

3.1.2 Findings from the "overall syllabus evaluation" dimension of the questionnaire

As regards decoration and pictures in the coursebook, 298 students (67.88%) contended that they are clear even though 141 students (32.12%) thought they are not lucid and need improvement. Students also exhibited positive view on the sequencing of the lesson topics. 362 students (82.46%) and 16 students (3.64%) considered this sequencing logical and very logical respectively, whereas 61 students (13.90%) still claimed the logic behind the topic arrangement needs reconsideration.

Students' view on the effectiveness of the coursebook was mostly positive as reflected through their responses to Question 5. 296 students (67.43%) viewed vocabulary in the coursebook is adequate for students to use in tasks. 304 students (69.25%) found essential grammatical structures in the coursebook. 332 students (75.63%) contended that tasks in this

task-based coursebook can help learners develop integrated language skills. Therefore, the responses to Question 6 reveal that their overall satisfaction level on this syllabus was high with 351 students (79.95%) and 32 students (7.29%) who divulged "Fairly satisfied" and "Very satisfied" attitudes respectively and only 56 students (12.76%) demonstrated slight satisfaction with this task-based syllabus.

3.1.3 Findings from the "detailed syllabus evaluation" dimension of the questionnaire

Responses to Question 7 in the questionnaire reflect difficulty degree of tasks in the syllabus. As displayed in Table 2, vocabulary tasks are not very difficult but not very easy. Most students (89.07%) looked upon vocabulary tasks as slightly difficult.

Table 2. Difficulty level of tasks in the syllabus

	Not difficult	Slightly difficult	Fairly difficult	Very difficult
7.1 Vocabulary task	0 students (0%)	391 students (89.07%)	48 students (10.93%)	0 students (0%)
7.2 Grammar task	67 students (15.26%)	361 students (82.23%)	11 students (2.51%)	0 students (0%)
7.3 Pronunciation task	5 students (1.14%)	371 students (84.51%)	59 students (13.44%)	4 students (0.91%)
7.4 Listening task	1 students (0.23%)	148 students (33.71%)	206 students (46.92%)	84 students (19.13%)
7.5 Speaking task	3 students (0.68%)	337 students (76.77%)	92 students (20.96%)	7 students (1.59%)
7.6 Reading task	5 students (1.14%)	392 students (89.29%)	38 students (8.66%)	4 students (0.91%)
7.7 Writing task	0 students (0%)	21 students (4.78%)	193 students (43.96%)	225 students (51.25%)

Most students (82.23%) also viewed grammar tasks as slightly difficult; nonetheless, 67 students (15.26%) maintained that grammar tasks are not difficult. This is likely since English teaching in high school level is prone to focus on the teaching of vocabulary and grammar

through repeated basic and advanced drills in grammar-translation approach framework. Task-based syllabus integrates vocabulary and grammar teaching into tasks as task conditions as Willis (1998) recommends "focus on language form to prevent fossilization" (p. 3).

Furthermore, majority of the students evaluated the difficulty degree of pronunciation tasks (84.51% of the students), speaking tasks (76.77% of the students), and reading tasks (89.29% of the students) at "slightly difficult" degree. Pronunciation tasks and reading tasks are not unfamiliar to students since these are also main sections in high school textbooks. Furthermore, grammar-translation approach employed in high school setting centers on a variety of reading tasks. Listening skill and writing skill, which tend to be ignored at high school since the national exams merely focus on vocabulary, grammar, and reading (Luu, 2011a). This forms the barrier to students' confident participation in task-based listening and writing activities. 206 students (46.92%) and 84 students (19.13%) appraised listening tasks at "fairly difficult" and "very difficult" levels respectively. Similarly, 193 students (43.96%) and 225 students (51.25%) assessed writing tasks in this task-based syllabus at "fairly difficult" and "very difficult" levels respectively.

Table 3. Difficulty level of tasks in the syllabus

	Not interesting	Slightly interesting	Fairly interesting	Very interesting
8.1 Vocabulary task	25 students (5.69%)	323 students (73.58%)	73 students (16.63%)	18 students (4.10%)
8.2 Grammar task	83 students (18.91%)	337 students (76.77%)	13 students (2.96%)	6 students (1.37%)
8.3 Pronunciation task	9 students (2.05%)	317 students (72.21%)	111 students (25.28%)	2 students (0.46%)
8.4 Listening task	4 students (0.91%)	139 students (31.66%)	247 students (56.26%)	49 students (11.16%)
8.5 Speaking task	1 student (0.23%)	85 students (19.36%)	292 students (66.51%)	61 students (13.90%)
8.6 Reading task	3 students (0.68%)	71 students (16.17%)	311 students (70.84%)	54 students (12.30%)
8.7	14	292	127	6 students

Writing task	students (3.19%)	students (66.51%)	students (43.96%)	(1.37%)

Even though most students found both vocabulary tasks and grammar tasks at the low degree of difficulty, more students display their interest in vocabulary tasks than grammar tasks as Table 3 denotes. 83 students (18.91%) and 337 students (76.77%) appraised grammar tasks at "not interesting" and "slightly interesting" degrees respectively in comparison with 25 students (5.69%) and 323 students (73.58%) appraised vocabulary tasks at "not interesting" and "slightly interesting" degrees respectively. Meanwhile, 73 students (16.63%) and 18 students (4.10%) evaluated vocabulary tasks at "fairly interesting" and "very interesting" degrees respectively in comparison with 13 students (2.96%) and 6 students (1.37%) evaluated grammar tasks at "fairly interesting" and "very interesting" degrees respectively.

Most students did not exhibit high motivation for pronunciation tasks and writing tasks. 317 students (72.21%) and 111 students (25.28%) assessed pronunciation tasks at "slightly interesting" and "fairly interesting" levels respectively. Likewise, 292 students (66.51%) and 127 students (43.96%) evaluated writing tasks at "slightly interesting" and "fairly interesting" levels respectively.

As displayed in Table 3, students were highly interested in tasks for such language skills as listening, speaking, and reading. 247 students (56.26%) and 49 students (11.16%) showed moderate interest and strong interest in listening tasks respectively. This can be said to be a success of this task-based syllabus since most students appraised listening tasks at difficult level, but still demonstrated their interest. This is because activities in task-based syllabus underscore using rather than learning language (Ellis, 2003); therefore, students no longer have to sit passively listening to the tape. They even can express meanings to accomplish tasks (Willis, 1998) without anxiety about losing face from errors.

Speaking tasks appealed to students even more than reading tasks since tasks provide them with opportunities to interact with each other (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 114) and "engage in naturalistic and meaningful communication" (Richards and Rodgers, 2005, p. 227). 292 students (66.51%) and 61 students (13.90%) evaluated speaking tasks at "fairly interesting" and "very interesting" levels respectively. Similarly, 311 students (70.84%) and 54 students (12.30%) assessed reading tasks at "fairly interesting" and "very interesting" levels respectively. The fact that most Vietnamese students are visual learners (Luu, 2011a) also contributes to their robust interest in reading tasks in task-based syllabus.

3.2 Findings from interviews

The findings from the first question divulge that ten out of twelve teachers (83.33%) exhibited positive overall appraisal on the current task-based syllabus. They alleged that the layout is clear and the items are logically arranged. Nonetheless, they still highlighted supplementary pictures and charts especially relevant to Vietnam context need to be included into this syllabus, since majority of EFL learners in Vietnam show visual learning style (Luu, 2011a).

The second question looks at the content, lesson topics, and tasks. Teachers' responses demonstrated their interest in topics in this task-based syllabus since they were relevant to a person's life activities, especially career life. Tasks, according to eleven teachers (91.67%), were designed in the way which determines the kind of language use and chances for learning that emerge (Ellis, 2000). However, one teacher (8.33%) suggested the addition of topics and tasks relating to entertainment and travel and preparation tasks with the focus on work-life balance. For instance, the syllabus may expose students to the topic "movies" and invite them to work in a team to name their favorite movies and justify their selection and this may entail listing, sequencing, sharing personal experiences, and opinion exchange. Thus, teachers need to plan and thoroughly select activities at each phase of teaching since task-based instruction plays a direct role in learners' language acquisition.

The third interview question collates the data on tasks of language skills in each lesson. Eight among twelve teachers (66.67%) show positive attitudes towards language skill tasks in terms of relevance and difficulty levels. They also underscored the usefulness of tasks for students at present as well as for their future. Nevertheless, four teachers (33.33%) contended that language skill tasks are above students' language competence level, which may cause their reticence in the classroom (Luu, 2011a). They also recommended more writing tasks such as memos and checklists be supplemented. According to them, some pronunciation issues such as sentence stress and connected speech also need to be adroitly integrated into the tasks.

The data from the fourth question showed that most teachers (58.33%) recommended the improvement in the content of the syllabus. More tasks based on updated sources in Vietnam setting and more tasks resorting to social networks should be incorporated. The difficulty degree of some tasks in the syllabus should be reduced as Robinson (2001) underscores the consideration of task difficulty in task-based syllabus design. Task difficulty should be at an adequate level for cognitive complexity to thrive rather than causing blockage to cognitive complexity, since

cognitive complexity is a strong effect on learners' production, and a premise for designing a task-based syllabus (Robinson, 2001).

3.3 Findings from the pretest and posttest

The students of the nine classes took the pretest and posttest of the same format for appraising the change in language competence through 14-week instruction with task-based syllabus. Since few students did not take the tests, the student sample who were assessed through this set of instruments was 432 students. The mean score of the pretest was 6.14 and the mean score of the posttest was 7.28 as displayed in Table 4, which denotes that the students made progress in language competence through the treatment.

Table 4. Paired samples t-test results

Paired Samples Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	432	6.14	1.273	.492
	Posttest	432	7.28	1.541	.774

Paired Samples Correlation

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pretest & Posttest	432	.194	.018

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pair 1	Pretest-Posttest	-1.14	1.408	.572	-1.12	-.05

Paired Samples Test

	t	df	Sig.

				(2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest & Posttest	-2.143	431	.021

The null hypothesis (H_0) posits that there would be no difference in the mean scores between the pretest and the posttest. Nonetheless, as the value of Sig. (2-tailed) of paired samples test was .021 which was less than .05, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected. This leads to the conclusion that there was a significant difference in mean scores between the pretest and the posttest, and the gain score for this progress was 1.14, which reflects the effect of teaching with task-based syllabus on students' language performance.

This effect results from the premise that task-based syllabus immerses students in a natural context for language use. Students have an opportunity to interact with one another and express their own meaning through accomplishing a task, which fosters language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 114). Furthermore, task-based syllabus offers students rich exposure to language plus opportunities to utilize it themselves. Opportunities to utilize the language without any apprehension of penalty for inevitable failures in accuracy also augment intrinsic motivation in students (Willis and Willis, 2007) for language learning. In other words, task-based syllabus with task-based activities which help students develop their language competence in real conditions (Brumfit, 1984) can have positive impact on language performance tests.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary of findings

The research findings divulged that a strength of the current task-based syllabus is the match between lesson topics and students' expectations. However, the syllabus still created difficulties for students including insufficient vocabulary, unfamiliar structures, and lack of life knowledge. Students' standpoint on the effectiveness of the coursebook was mostly positive as reflected through the findings that majority of the students viewed vocabulary in the coursebook as adequate for students to use in tasks and most students found essential grammatical structures in the coursebook. Most students confirmed that tasks in this task-based coursebook can help learners develop integrated language skills. The effect of teaching with task-based syllabus on students' language performance is also mirrored through a significant difference in mean scores between the pretest and the posttest.

This study offers a profound insight into the effectiveness of task-based syllabus in enhancing students' language performance, thereby highlighting to teachers and administrators the values of sustainable syllabus innovation in English language teaching. Teachers are decision-makers and change agents in actual teaching context as Careless (1999) points out, "teachers are the individuals who implement, adapt, reject, or ignore curriculum innovation. It is thus something atruism that they are the core of the innovation process" (p. 374). Teachers play a crucial role in the success of an innovative approach. Their beliefs in task-based instruction therefore need to be reinforced from the results of this study so that they can be change agents in the classroom who facilitate their students towards communication activities in task-based syllabus.

5. Limitations and future research directions

As in every study, limitations of this study have been discerned (Luu, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e, 2013d). This study was conducted on 439 second-year students at Saigon Technology University (STU) only through non-random sampling approach. Therefore, even though students who involved themselves in the study provided elaborate evaluation on the current task-based syllabus and its impacts on language performance, the research findings can be utilized in this university merely or in other schools with similar conditions with caution.

This study also centered on young adult learners of around 19 to 26 years old. Learners of different age groups may display different perceptions. Moreover, the participants in this research were at the intermediate English proficiency level. Another research which involves students with lower or higher level of English proficiency should be conducted to provide more comprehensive results as regards the role of task-based syllabus in building EFL learners' language competence. The research results should be also further tested on students across universities rather than within a case study as in this research.

Due to such limitations of the current research as its cross-sectional nature and the usage of perceptual instruments, the findings from empirical questionnaire survey must be further tested (Luu, 2012f, 2013e, 2013f). Another limitation is that the causal direction of the relationships among the variables has been partially established (Luu, 2011b, 2012g). The question of causality can be more comprehensively addressed by a stronger longitudinal

research design in which all the variables are measured at different points in time (Wilderom et al., 2000).

A stronger longitudinal research design (Luu, 2012h) such as experimentation can be a new research avenue. Even though this research corroborated the relationship between task-based syllabus and learners' language competence, a future research can further investigate whether task-based syllabus or task-based instruction enhances learning strategies, especially metacognitive learning strategies. Furthermore, task-based instruction is also intrinsically motivating (Willis and Willis, 2007); therefore, the interconnection between teaching with task-based syllabus and learners' motivation can be another research path.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire aims at collecting data for the research entitled "Evaluating task-based syllabus for EFL learners at Saigon Technology University (STU)." Your responses will make great contributions to the success of this research. We ensure that your responses will be merely for research purpose.

Please spend some time completing this questionnaire. Please tick (✓) the appropriate choice or fill in the blank.

1. Personal information

1. Age: .

2. Gender: 1. □ Male 2. □ Female

3. You went to high school in:

1. □ a city, a town

2. □ a countryside, a mountainous area, a remote rural area

4. How long have you been learning English?

1. □ Never 2. □ Up to 3 years

3. □ From more than 3 up to 7 years 4. □ More than 7 years

5. Are you studying English at any foreign language center?

1. □ Yes 2. □ No

2. Syllabus evaluation

Student needs

1. Which of the following would you want to study through the English course?

□ Vocabulary

□ Grammar and structures

□ Pronunciation

□ Listening

□ Speaking

□ Reading

□ Writing

2. How do lesson topics in the syllabus match your expectation?

□ No □ Slightly □ Fairly□ Highly

3. What difficulties do you face during the study?

□ Lack of vocabulary

□ Unfamiliar structures

□ Lack of life knowledge

□ Other reasons:

Overall syllabus evaluation

4. What is your view on the following aspects of the coursebook?

4.1 Decoration and pictures

□ Not clear □ Clear □ Very clear

4.2 Sequencing of topics

□ Not logical □ Logical □ Very logical

5. What is your general view on the effectiveness of the coursebook?

5.1 It provides adequate vocabulary □

5.2 It provides essential grammatical structures □

5.3 It develops integrated language skills □

6. Overall, how are you satisfied with the coursebook?

□ Not satisfied □ Slightly satisfied □ Fairly satisfied □Very satisfied

Detailed syllabus evaluation

7. How do you evaluate the difficulty level of tasks in the syllabus?

	Not difficult	Slightly difficult	Fairly difficult	Very difficult
7.1 Vocabulary task	□	□	□	□
7.2 Grammar task	□	□	□	□
7.3 Pronunciation task	□	□	□	□
7.4 Listening task	□	□	□	□
7.5 Speaking task	□	□	□	□
7.6 Reading task	□	□	□	□
7.7 Writing task	□	□	□	□

8. How interesting are the tasks in the syllabus?

	Not interesting	Slightly interesting	Fairly interesting	Very interesting
8.1 Vocabulary task	□	□	□	□
8.2 Grammar task	□	□	□	□
8.3 Pronunciation task	□	□	□	□
8.4 Listening task	□	□	□	□
8.5 Speaking task	□	□	□	□
8.6	□	□	□	□

Reading task				
8.7	□	□	□	□
Writing task				

9. Which parts in the syllabus do you think are unnecessary, need to be changed or supplemented?

Unnecessary	Need to be changed	Need to be supplemented
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____	3. _____