
Teachers' and Learners' Reactions to a Task-Based EFL Course in Thailand

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Although many studies have described the L2 learning opportunities created by individual tasks, considerably less research has investigated task-based syllabi and courses (Bruton, 2002; Candlin, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003). This case study investigated teachers' and learners' reactions to a task-based EFL course at a Thai university. A team of Thai EFL teachers created the syllabus, which was pilot tested and revised before being introduced universitywide. For this study, we collected the teachers' and learners' impressions about the course over a 12-month period during the pilot testing and revision phases. We identified their reactions using a qualitative analysis of oral and written data elicited through (a) task evaluations, (b) learning notebooks, (c) observations, (d) course evaluations, and (e) interviews. The findings indicate that, despite initial reservations, they believed the course encouraged learners to become more independent and addressed their real world academic needs. Implications for the implementation of task-based language teaching in other EFL contexts are discussed.

Although the L2 acquisition and pedagogy literature (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2000; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998) defines *task* in different ways, most studies agree that the crucial feature of tasks is their focus on the communication of meaning. For pedagogical contexts, researchers (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001) have defined a *task* as "an activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 11). As summarized in recent reviews (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003), using tasks as the basis for language teaching has been motivated by two main theoretical perspectives in L2 acquisition theory: the psycholinguistic approach and the sociocultural approach. Proponents of the psycholinguistic approach have claimed that task-based interaction facilitates L2 development by bringing together

input features, learner-internal capacities, and language production (Gass, 2003; Long, 1996; Mackey, in press), and have explored how task characteristics and conditions affect learners' allocation of attentional resources during task performance (e.g., Robinson, 2001; Skehan & Foster, 2001). Researchers working within the sociocultural approach (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000) have argued that task-based interaction encourages interlocutors to co-construct meaning by contributing aspects of language to the conversation in ways that allow for the appropriation of new knowledge and the consolidation of existing knowledge. Although these theoretical approaches differ in terms of their underlying assumptions about the processes of L2 learning and the role of social and cognitive factors in those processes, they both acknowledge the benefits of task-based language teaching.

Proponents of task-based language teaching have argued that it is an ideal medium for implementing *focus on form*, a methodological principle in which learners' attention is drawn to form in the context of meaning. Long (2000) and Long and Robinson (1998) have described focus on form as a middle path that avoids the problems associated with adopting either a linguistic unit of analysis, that is, focus on forms, or a purely meaning-based approach, that is, focus on meaning. Focus on forms has been associated with teaching approaches that are based on *synthetic syllabi*, which means different parts of language are taught separately and the learners' goal is to learn each part and then resynthesize them (Wilkins, 1976, cited in Nunan, 1989). In contrast, focus on form is associated with *analytic syllabi*, which are organized according to the learners' purposes for learning language and the types of language performance they need to meet those purposes (Wilkins, 1975, cited in Nunan, 1989). The learners' goal is to recognize the linguistic components associated with the target purposes and corresponding language performances. Advocates of analytic syllabi have argued that they are more compatible with the processes of L2 learning, such as progressive mapping of forms and functions, movement through developmental sequences, and restructuring of existing knowledge (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993; Skehan, 2002). Recent research has demonstrated that various types of focus-on-form instruction have facilitated L2 learning in a wide range of instructional contexts (for reviews see Ellis, 2001; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Proponents of task-based language teaching have also claimed that it can address the growing need for relevance and accountability in L2 teaching, particularly for learners with specific academic, occupational, or vocational purposes (Long, 2005). In Long's (2000) approach to task-based language teaching, the emphasis on learner-centeredness and relevance is achieved by analyzing the learners' real-world needs and interests. Their needs and interests are then organized and sequenced

into a task syllabus, which by definition is a type of analytic syllabus. Unfortunately, as researchers have pointed out (Long, 2000; Skehan 1998, 2003), there are no agreed-on criteria for selecting and sequencing tasks. As a result, teachers may rely on their intuitions to make decisions about which tasks to include in a syllabus and the order in which they should be presented. Once the learners' needs and relevant tasks have been organized into a task syllabus, materials are developed and pedagogical procedures are selected based on context-specific factors such as teacher philosophy and preference; learner age, proficiency, literacy level, aptitude, and cognitive style; the nature of the target linguistic features; and the nature of the learning environment (Long, 2005). In the final stage, performance-based assessment instruments are administered to assess learning outcomes, and the entire course is evaluated.

Although task-based language teaching has been regarded favorably because it is compatible with theoretical and empirical research in SLA, it integrates attention to linguistic form in the context of meaning, and it emphasizes learners' needs, it has been criticized on both theoretical and pedagogical grounds (see, e.g., Swan, 2005). Nevertheless, it has been adopted in many different L2 teaching contexts, including EFL settings such as China (Gatbonton & Gu, 1994), Hong Kong (Carless, 1997, 2004; Carless & Gordon, 1997; Mok-Cheung, 2001), and Thailand (Watson Todd, 2001, 2006). Because task-based language teaching represents a departure from so-called traditional L2 teaching, that is, one that follows a synthetic syllabus and adopts a focus-on-forms approach, which is still commonly used in EFL contexts (Bax, 2003; Bruton, 2002; Fotos, 1998; Harmer, 2003), it is important to consider how teachers and learners react when task-based approaches are introduced (for a discussion of the diffusion of task-based language teaching, see Markee, 1997).

Several position articles and empirical studies have described how learners and teachers who were accustomed to traditional teaching reacted to task-based language teaching. Although many of these studies have examined a weak form of task-based language teaching in which individual tasks are integrated into courses that follow a synthetic syllabus and adopt a focus-on-forms methodology, as opposed to a strong form in which tasks are the organizing principle for the entire course (Skehan, 1996), they provide some insight into how teachers and learners who are accustomed to focus-on-forms instruction and synthetic syllabi may react to more communicative, learner-centered approaches. Several studies have reported that teachers questioned whether they possess the English proficiency, oral communication skills, and sociolinguistic and strategic competencies needed to implement communicative approaches (Butler, 2004; Carless, 2003, 2004; Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Hui, 1997; Li, 1998). Teachers have expressed concerns about discipline if learners became noisy while carrying out tasks, particularly in large

classes, which can create tension with other teachers and administrators (Carless, 2004; Hui, 1997; Li, 1998). They have also reported some difficulty monitoring learners' language use and voiced concerns about the learners' use of the first language rather than the target language (Carless, 2004; Carless & Gordon, 1997). In terms of learners' perceptions, they have reported appreciation for the more learner-centered and self-directed approach associated with task-based language teaching (Wiriya-karun, 2001). However, they have expressed some reservations about the greater emphasis on expressing and sharing opinions (Hui, 1997) and about the value of peer interaction (McDonough, 2004). In addition, learners with lower English proficiency have expressed reservations about interacting in the target language (Tsui, 1996).

To summarize, although the use of tasks in L2 teaching is supported by several approaches within L2 acquisition theory and research, relatively few empirical studies have documented how teachers and learners react to entirely task-based courses, as opposed to the use of individual tasks. As part of a curriculum revision project at Chiang Mai University (CMU), Thai EFL teachers created a task-based course based on their review of the task-based language teaching literature and the results of a needs analysis. The purposes of this case study were (a) to identify teacher and learner reactions to the course and (b) to describe how their concerns, if any, were addressed. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What were Thai teacher and learner reactions to a task-based EFL course?
2. If they had any concerns about the course, how were those concerns addressed?

We decided to carry out this case study when the first author (Kim) was at CMU working on a research study and the second author (Wanpen) was preparing to pilot test the task syllabus. Kim had taught in the English department for several years and returned regularly to carry out research projects that investigated Thai EFL learners' acquisition of English. Wanpen had worked in the English department for more than 25 years and was involved in the design of the task-based course. Before describing the method of the case study in more detail, we provide a brief overview of CMU to familiarize readers with this instructional context.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Instructional Context

This case study was carried out at CMU, which is a large, public university in northern Thailand that requires students to complete four

integrated-skills EFL courses. The course described in this article is the first in that four-course series. The English department faculty decided to revise the course, which previously followed a synthetic syllabus with a focus-on-forms approach, after the Thai government made English a required subject nationwide and promoted its use for international communication. At that time, the government also decided to emphasize the use of English to raise learners' awareness about their own culture so that they could share their knowledge about Thailand when communicating with people from other countries. In response to these policy changes, the university requested that the department revise the integrated-skills courses so that the learners developed the ability to use English to foster cross-cultural communication, to achieve personal and academic goals, and to promote lifelong learning. The department agreed to revise the course and carried out a questionnaire-based needs analysis, which revealed that teachers and learners were dissatisfied with the previous course. The department reviewed relevant literature and English curricula in place at comparable Thai universities, and proposed a task syllabus (Winitchaikul, Wiriyaichitra, & Chaikitmongkol, 2002). They also decided to incorporate learning strategies into the course in response to the new emphasis on helping learners achieve academic goals and promoting lifelong learning.

The Task Syllabus

The task syllabus (see Appendix) was created by a team of EFL teachers¹ at CMU. Wanpen was a member of the team and had become involved in the project because of her interest in learning strategies. The team designed the task syllabus around three tasks that targeted the learners' interests and raised their awareness of regional social and educational programs: (a) applying to an international cultural exchange program, (b) attending a youth seminar about social and environmental awareness, and (c) proposing a teen-oriented program for an English-language television station.² The content of the tasks targeted the learners' real world interests, such as Thai culture, social and environmental problems, and media programs, and were motivated by the government's emphasis on using English to foster greater awareness of Thai culture and society. The tasks also targeted real world activities that the

¹ The members of the course design team that created the task syllabus and materials were Wanpen Chaikitmongkol, Bordin Chinda, and Suchart Hinmali.

² After the task syllabus was pilot tested, the team decided to reverse the order of the youth seminar task and the television program task because the participants reported that the youth seminar task was more difficult.

learners were likely to undertake outside the L2 classroom, such as sharing information about Thailand with non-Thais, or applying to regional or international educational programs. Each task required approximately nine 50-minute class periods to complete and culminated with a written report and an individual or group oral presentation.³ The team decided to incorporate listening and reading materials from a commercial textbook, *Skyline 3* (Brewster, Davies, & Rogers, 2001), into the course. They selected excerpts from the textbook that complemented the tasks' content as well as the knowledge and skills needed to carry out the tasks. They also created supplementary materials to explicitly introduce learning strategies that were useful for task completion. The target learning strategies included *cognitive strategies* (i.e., techniques that learners can use to acquire knowledge or skills) such as guessing meaning from context, and *metacognitive strategies* (i.e., management techniques that learners can use to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning) such as task analysis and self-reflection (Derry & Murphy, 1986; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987; Thompson & Rubin, 1996). Because the course adopted a focus-on-form approach, attention to linguistic form occurred in response to an actual or perceived problem with a particular form or function. However, explicit information about the language forms relevant for each task was provided as resource materials that the learners could consult if they required additional knowledge about language structure. The course assessment included three oral and written task performances, periodic in-class quizzes, a final examination with tasks similar to those carried out in class, and a portfolio containing assignments that the learners had completed throughout the semester.

METHOD

Participants

The EFL learner-participants ($N = 35$) were enrolled in the section of the task-based course that Wanpen taught during the pilot testing phase.⁴ They were first-year students in the English department between

³ In addition to the two 50-minute classes per week, students also completed an online self-access module. However, during the pilot testing phase, the team decided to increase the amount of in-class time to two 75-minute class periods and move the online module to the second course because the learners required more class time to finish the task materials.

⁴ Although three sections of the course were offered during the pilot testing phase, only the learners in Wanpen's section were included in the analysis because the learners in the other two sections did not complete all of the task and course evaluations.

the ages of 17 and 19. They were all native speakers of Thai who had studied English in primary and secondary schools for a minimum of 8 years. They had been admitted to the English department based on their scores on regional or national entrance examinations. The English department considered the learners to be intermediate level, but more specific information about their proficiency was not available because they had never taken standardized tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). They rarely used English for communication outside class but were exposed to English through mass media, such as music, movies, and the Internet. However, two learners had attended high school for one year in the United States as exchange students, and three learners reported traveling in English-dominant countries from 2 to 3 months.

The EFL teacher-participants ($N = 13$) represented the various types of teachers who worked in the English department at CMU. Nine of the teachers were Thais with master's degrees in TESOL or related fields and at least 15 years of experience teaching English. Two teachers, also Thai, had master's degrees but had taught English for only one or 2 years. The remaining two teachers were non-Thais (both from the United States) with bachelor's degrees in fields unrelated to education but who had taught in Thailand for at least 5 years. Three of the teacher-participants, including Wanpen, created the task-based course. They each taught a section of the task-based course during the pilot testing phase. The teachers participated in the evaluation of the task-based course as part of their assigned service duties.

Data

This case study drew on data from four primary and two secondary sources to gain a rich understanding of the participants' reactions to the task syllabus. The following sections describe each data type in detail.

Task Evaluation

Learners completed a task evaluation at the end of each task, which consisted of six open-ended questions about the aspects of the task that the learners liked and those that they disliked; the skills, knowledge and strategies they had learned; the real world relevance of the materials; and the teaching approach. The task evaluation included a multiple-choice item about their satisfaction with the amount of class time spent on the skills and knowledge targeted in the task. They completed the task evaluation in English and/or Thai as homework at the end of each task.

Learning Notebooks

The learners were required to keep a learning notebook as part of their portfolio. They were encouraged to record any information about the vocabulary, strategies, skills, and tasks that they were learning. They made entries in their notebooks either during class or in their free time (or both). Wanpen periodically collected their learning notebooks to monitor their progress and provide feedback as needed.

Observations

Several EFL teacher-participants observed the pilot classes. They received the lesson and materials one or 2 days in advance of the observation and were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the teaching procedures and materials. They provided Wanpen with written comments that they recorded during or immediately after the observation.

Course Evaluation

The information obtained from task evaluations and observations was used to create the course evaluation, which consisted of 12 open-ended questions about various aspects of the course, including the teaching approach, the materials and activities, the real world applicability of the content, and the tasks. The remaining two items were a scalar response item about the usefulness of the course for learning the skills, strategies, and areas of knowledge targeted in the course, and a ranking item about their perceived improvement for the targeted skills, strategies, and knowledge. The learners completed the course evaluation in English and/or Thai during class on the last day of the semester.

Interviews

A secondary data source was informal interviews carried out with learners in the pilot class and teacher-participants who had observed Wanpen's classes and provided written comments about the syllabus and materials. The interviews were a forum to discuss the issues raised in the task evaluations, course evaluations, and observations in more detail.

Field Notes

The other secondary data source was our field notes, including Wanpen's reactions to the teaching materials, which she recorded in a notebook while preparing lessons, during class, and immediately after class.

She also recorded the discussions about the syllabus and materials that occurred during departmental meetings and in informal conversations with her colleagues. Kim's field notes included her observations of Wanpen's classes, informal conversations with teachers and learners, and her notes from departmental meetings.

Data Analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of the task evaluations, learning notebooks, observations, and course evaluations, and the secondary data were the interviews and our field notes. As is typical in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 1998), we adopted a cyclic, recursive approach to the data analysis, so that our preliminary reflections guided our subsequent data collection, and the subsequent data helped us refine our reflections. For example, our impressions about the learners' responses to the task evaluations influenced our creation of the course evaluation. Similarly, our reflections about the teachers' observations informed our decisions about which topics to nominate during their subsequent interviews. Because our specific type of qualitative research was a case study, our main goal was to describe the context and participants, and then analyze the data for general themes or issues (Stake, 1995).

After all the data had been collected, we analyzed the entire corpus for general themes that illustrated the participants' reactions to the task-based course. We adopted an inductive approach in which themes emerge from the data. However, our knowledge of the task-based language teaching literature provided us with some awareness of the issues that may arise when task-based approaches are introduced in contexts where focus-on-forms instruction has been prevalent. To begin, Kim read the entire corpus and compiled a list of 10 general themes, which are listed in Table 1. Once she had identified these initial themes, she then read each data source to identify segments of the texts that illustrated each theme, pooling segments across individuals and sources. As more segments were added, the list of general themes was refined by grouping related themes and then renaming the combined category. For example, the initial themes *positive feelings associated with the course* and *statements about learning outcomes* were grouped and renamed *learner independence* because both sets of segments described learner engagement and self-reliance and its impact on learning. The list of initial themes was also refined by renaming categories, which occurred when it became apparent that the label used for an initial theme was too narrow to describe all the relevant segments. For example, the initial category *comparison with previous courses* was renamed *adjusting to task-based language teaching be-*

TABLE 1
Initial and Final Themes

Initial themes	Final themes
1. Positive feelings associated with the course	1. Learner independence
2. Statements about learning outcomes	
3. Impressions about grammar	2. Course content
4. Reactions to the target skills and strategies	
5. Teacher feedback	3. Providing learner support
6. Understanding goals/assignments	
7. Reactions to the book/materials	4. Managing course materials
8. Appropriateness of the course for CMU	
9. Comparison with previous courses	5. Adjusting to task-based language teaching
10. Application of material outside class	6. Real world relevance

cause the relevant segments expressed the participants' perception that they required time to become accustomed to the task-based teaching approach, as opposed to simply stating that the course was different from previous courses.

Having extracted all segments and grouped them under the relevant themes, she then retested the validity of the general themes (referred to by Erickson, 1986, as “[testing] the evidentiary warrant” [p. 196] for an assertion) by rereading the entire corpus to find additional segments that could serve as confirming or disconfirming evidence. Two disconfirming segments were identified in the theme *course content* (i.e., completely negative comments about the course) and three disconfirming segments were identified in the theme *real world relevance* (i.e., statements that the course did not apply to anything).⁵ As a final step in the data analysis procedure, Wanpen read the entire corpus and checked the validity of the general themes and supporting segments that Kim had identified. Any segments missed by the first author were included in the analysis ($n = 5$), and any differences in opinion ($n = 3$) were resolved through discussion, generally deferring to the person who had first-hand knowledge of the situation. For example, the researcher who had interviewed a teacher made the final decision about the categorization of the interview data, and the researcher who had been present at a department meeting made final determinations regarding the comments provided by the attendees.

⁵ The disconfirming segments were traced back to two learners who had spent one year in the United States as exchange students during high school and had more advanced English skills than their classmates. Although such students were not allowed to place out of the task-based course during the pilot testing phase, they would have that option when the course was implemented universitywide. Consequently, their disconfirming segments were not considered a threat to the validity of the themes because they were not representative of the student population that would be enrolled in the task-based course.

FINDINGS

Teacher and Learner Reactions

In terms of the first research question, which asked how the teachers and learners reacted to the task-based course, analysis of the data revealed that their impressions centered on three themes: (a) increased learner independence, (b) concerns with the course content, and (c) perceptions about real world relevance. The following sections present the findings related to each theme.

Increased Learner Independence

Teachers and learners believed that the task-based course helped the learners to become more independent thinkers and learners. The learners reported that the teaching approach gave them an opportunity to think by themselves to accomplish the tasks and manage their learning. For example, one learner wrote the following comment on a task reflection assignment: "Studying by myself is a good thing because I can learn to solve the problems and think by myself." Similarly, another learner stated on the course evaluation that he found the course "really interesting because I got [a] chance to think by myself." The learners associated several positive outcomes with the ability to think independently, such as taking pride in their accomplishments, being more responsible, remembering what they had learned, gaining self-confidence, and feeling more curious about learning. The learners recognized the usefulness of being able to think and learn independently, rather than exclusively relying on their teacher. For example, one learner stated that she believed self-directed learning "was necessary in my daily life because no one can help me all the time." Another learner explained that the course had helped her develop the ability to recognize what information she did not know and how to obtain it without relying on the teacher. The teachers also reported that the learners were showing greater independence. For example, one observer wrote on the observation checklist that the teaching approach was helping students to "think on their own." Wanpen wrote in her field notes during the media task that one of the students "showed that she remembered what she had learned and why she had learned it and what she had to do with that information."

The learning notebooks kept by the learners provided further evidence that they were independently seeking information useful for task completion. For example, about two-thirds of the learners in the class recorded vocabulary items useful for task performance that had not been presented in the course materials or by Wanpen during class. When

recording such items in their notebooks, nearly half of the learners used strategies that had not been emphasized in class, such as *semantic mapping* and *word associations* (i.e., listing antonyms and synonyms). In addition, their notebook entries demonstrated that nearly one third of the learners were adopting planning and self-monitoring strategies when preparing to perform their task.

Course Content

Though learners and teachers initially expressed concerns about the course content, their reactions became more positive as the semester progressed. Their initial concern was a perceived lack of grammar instruction. On the task evaluation for Task 1, half of the learners reported that there had not been enough grammar instruction. Several learners stated that the linguistic forms relevant for Task 1 (past-tense forms, participles, comparatives, and superlatives) were structures that they already knew. One learner commented that they had studied “something we already knew and the lesson[s] didn’t teach us more about it.” Another learner felt that it was boring to study the grammar that she and her classmates already knew. Several teachers also complained about the amount of grammar instruction and the language forms targeted in the course. For example, Wanpen recorded in her field notes a conversation with an observer who complained that the students were not learning in the course, and another teacher wrote on the observation checklist that “the grammar is too easy . . . it’s not challenging.” When asked in the interviews about what could be done to improve the course, several learners and teachers made suggestions related to grammar instruction, including adding more advanced grammar topics and teacher-led explanations about grammar and assigning grammar exercises.

However, by the end of the semester the teachers and learners no longer voiced complaints about the amount or type of grammar instruction provided in the task course. For example, the number of learners reporting on task evaluations that there had not been enough grammar instruction decreased to 20% for Task 2 and less than 10% for Task 3. Rather than voice concerns about grammar, they expressed positive reactions to the target language skills and learning strategies. Several learners reported on their task evaluations that the learning strategies introduced in the materials were useful for learning English both inside and outside the classroom. For example, one learner wrote that the cognitive strategies for vocabulary learning showed him “a good way to use some techniques when you study.” The learners reported regular use of the cognitive strategies for learning vocabulary that had been introduced in the course, such as recording new words, reviewing vocabulary items, and guessing meaning from context. And their learning notebook entries

indicated that they were using those strategies outside class time. They also reacted positively to the metacognitive strategies that had been targeted in the course, such as *task analysis*, *critical thinking*, and *evaluation*. One learner wrote on the course evaluation that she believed the learning strategies had helped her to learn how “to think and be responsible,” and another stated that he believed the strategies had taught him “how to respond [to] all my assignment[s].” The teachers also had positive comments about the target strategies and skills. One teacher explained during an interview that using context clues was a very helpful strategy for students, and another commented after observing Wanpen’s class that the task analysis strategy was beneficial because learners could apply it to other tasks.

Real World Relevance

Participants recognized the relevance of the task-based course to the learners’ real world academic needs but did not comment on its relevance to any specific needs outside an academic context. When asked if they could apply the knowledge, skills, and strategies targeted in the course outside the language classroom, many learners replied that they could apply the skills that they had gained in the task-based course to other academic subjects. For example, one learner wrote that “I can use the knowledge from this subject to use in other subjects,” and another learner stated that he used the skills taught in the task course “every day with many subjects.” Another learner reported that the cognitive strategy of guessing meaning from context was useful during test-taking because she “cannot have a dictionary in the examination room.” The participants believed that the skills they had acquired in the task course were applicable to a variety of academic tasks that they carried out in other courses, such as preparing for examinations, planning and delivering oral presentations, carrying out collaborative projects, and listening to lectures. The teachers also reported that the task-based course had helped the learners acquire academic skills that they could apply in other courses. One teacher stated that the course materials helped make what the learners studied in class more concrete and relevant to their real life academic situations.

However, the learners and teachers were less likely to recognize how or when they could apply the same skills and knowledge in nonacademic contexts. When asked whether the task-based course helped them develop skills that could be used in their present or future daily lives, the learners often simply replied “yes” or gave vague responses such as “when talking to foreigners” or “when I find a job.” Although many learners believed that the task-based course provided them with knowledge and skills that they could use “now and in the future,” they gave few specific

examples of how they might use them in their daily lives outside the language classroom. The teachers also rarely emphasized the relationship between the task-based course and the learners' nonacademic needs. For example, one teacher wrote on the observation checklist that the course taught learners "what they can apply in real life," but he did not explain in more detail. When asked specifically about this topic during the interviews, the teachers questioned whether the learners used English outside class on a daily basis or whether they could anticipate their future real world needs. Instead, they believed that the course should encourage learners to use English as a tool for personal enrichment and for obtaining and evaluating information, and that they could accomplish this goal by targeting the learners' real world interests and academic needs.

Addressing Participants' Concerns

In terms of the second research question, which asked how the participants' concerns about the task-based course were addressed, analysis of the data revealed three primary concerns: (a) preparing teachers and learners for the task-based course, (b) providing greater support for the learners, and (c) managing course materials.

Adjusting to Task-Based Language Teaching

The participants reported that they needed time to adjust to the task-based teaching approach. Several learners commented that they had never taken an English course like the task-based course before. For example, one learner explained the differences between this course and his high school English classes: "In high school we only listened [to] a teacher but now we can express everything that we can." They reported that their high school classes had taught them about grammar and that they had learned by listening to the teacher explain grammar and by reading about grammar in their textbooks. Wanpen commented in her field notes that "I think these students are still used to doing what the teacher tells them. They are not used to thinking by themselves or applying knowledge to a new thing." Her field notes described many conversations with learners who remarked that their previous English courses simply required them to remember grammar rules. The teachers expressed some concerns about their own ability to implement the task-based course. For example, during interviews one pilot teacher claimed that it is "difficult to communicate the philosophy of the course to students," and an observer questioned whether the department "teachers can teach this course." Wanpen wrote the following in her field notes

after a lesson in which she had to elicit information from students: “Spontaneity can be a major problem with teaching in student-centered environment like this because the teacher has to be able to give proper prompts, respond, and write students’ answer in good grammar on blackboard.” She also wondered if some teachers would need time to become accustomed to the learner-centeredness of task-based language teaching.

To address this concern, the course design team undertook several revisions designed to help learners and teachers understand and adapt to task-based language teaching. For the learners, the team developed an introductory unit in which learners discuss their ideas about language learning and their roles in the learning process. They included the topic of grammar instruction in this introductory unit so that the learners had opportunities to discuss the role of grammatical knowledge in their previous English-learning experiences and to recognize that the task-based course emphasizes the application of knowledge and skills for task accomplishment and critical thinking rather than the acquisition of explicit linguistic knowledge. For the teachers, they compiled a detailed teacher’s guide that explained the learning strategies targeted in the course, described the objectives for each class, and provided teaching suggestions for each lesson. Wanpen also created and facilitated a 3-hour workshop for all teachers assigned to teach the course. During the workshop she introduced the principles and philosophy of task-based language teaching and demonstrated how to introduce cognitive and metacognitive strategies explicitly.

Providing Learner Support

The participants expressed concerns about the amount of teacher support and guidance that was provided in the course. For example, the learners occasionally had doubts about whether they understood the task assignments. One learner wrote in her evaluation of Task 1 that it was “hard to know if I understand the same thing that you want to tell me or not.” Another learner stated that “it’s not enough for me to do by myself because it’s like I don’t know what I have to do.” The learners felt that greater teacher feedback would have helped them complete the tasks more successfully. A learner wrote in her evaluation of Task 2 that she would have liked more suggestions and knowledge from the teacher about her task performance. The teachers also commented on the need to provide learners with clear instructions and feedback. A teacher who observed Wanpen’s class during Task 1 believed that the “teacher needs to give clearer instructions of what to do and why.” Kim similarly wrote in her field notes that “the teachers need to make the link between the task objectives and the in-class activities more explicit.” One teacher

suggested during an interview that each task unit should include feedback days so that the learners could get individual guidance from their teacher before they submitted their written task assignments.

To provide the learners with additional guidance, the course design team created supplementary materials that helped the learners understand the task assignments and recognize the steps they needed to complete to perform the tasks. After using the new materials for Task 2, Wanpen wrote in her field notes that “most students who looked like they need more guidance looked relieved when they received the supplementary materials.” Peer and teacher feedback opportunities were incorporated into the course so that the learners could check their understanding of the task requirements prior to performing them. They also created materials to help the learners improve their time management, prepare for task performances, and recognize what they were learning. They also included a self-evaluation exercise at the end of each task so that learners could reflect on their task performance and assess whether they had achieved their objectives.

Managing Course Materials

The participants had some reservations about the amount of materials used in the task-based course. Some teachers felt that too many activities were assigned for each lesson. For example, one teacher remarked that he would not be able to engage his students in casual conversation or provide individual feedback because “with the tight schedules and time, it seems that I’ll always have to start and end the lessons as scheduled.” They also reported difficulty integrating and transitioning between the course materials, which included a commercial textbook, a student workbook, a teacher’s guide with reference materials, and individual assignments. One teacher explained that “having to flip back and forth . . . can be somewhat sort of annoying and tiring at times.” Another felt that the lesson he observed had a lot of “jumping around” and that the relationship between the task and strategy materials and the commercial textbook seemed forced and artificial. Although the learners reported fewer reactions to the materials than the teachers, they did express some negative comments about the commercial textbook. Several learners remarked that they felt the textbook was “boring,” and others believed that it was too expensive. In addition, some learners felt that the task-based course did not use the commercial textbook enough to justify its cost.

The team undertook two revisions designed to address the participants’ concerns with the course materials. First, they reduced the number of materials and activities targeted in each lesson so that the teachers would have more time to address their students’ needs. Second, they consolidated the course materials so that the teachers and learners

would not have to switch repeatedly between sources during a lesson. However, they have not decided on the most effective way to address the participants' concerns about the commercial textbook. As a member of the team explained, they had created the tasks first and then searched for a commercial textbook to complement those tasks. Consequently, it had been very difficult to integrate the book into the tasks. Some teachers have suggested that the commercial textbook be eliminated from the task-based course and requested that the course design team create a textbook that is more closely related to the tasks.

Summary of the Findings

To summarize the findings for Research Question 1, these Thai EFL teachers and learners generally had positive reactions to the task-based course. They believed that it encouraged learners to become more independent and that it targeted their real world academic needs. Although they initially reacted negatively to the course content because it did not include explicit grammar instruction, they came to appreciate the emphasis on learning strategies and task performance. The findings for Research Question 2 indicated that teachers as well as learners required activities and information that could help them adjust to task-based teaching, and both groups had some concerns with the amount of materials and activities per lesson. In addition, the learners required more support and guidance to carry out the tasks successfully. The course design team responded to these concerns through a number of revisions, such as creating a more detailed teacher guide, facilitating a workshop for teachers, reducing the number of activities per lesson, and creating supplementary materials for the learners.

DISCUSSION

We believe that the findings have implications for the implementation of task-based courses in other EFL contexts. First, as described earlier, Long's (2000) approach to task-based language teaching emphasizes learners' real world needs. Some researchers have questioned whether this approach is applicable in foreign language contexts where learners may have few immediate or future needs to use the target language outside class (Sheen, 1994). However, EFL learners in academic contexts, particularly university-level learners, have immediate academic needs, and these needs are a legitimate real world target for task-based EFL courses. As proponents of learning-strategy instruction have pointed

out (Rubin & Thompson, 1994; Wenden, 1998), cognitive and metacognitive strategies complement learners' real world academic orientation and can help meet their immediate learning needs while developing their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, EFL learners have real world interests that can be targeted in task-based courses as a way to sustain their engagement in the language learning process. This task-based course gave the learners opportunities to learn more about topics that interested them (Thai culture, social issues, and media) while helping them understand that the skills and strategies they learned in their EFL class may be useful for other academic subjects.

Second, this study provides further evidence that EFL teachers and learners require support when transitioning from traditional L2 teaching methods to task-based language teaching, as previous studies have reported (e.g., Li, 1998, Mok-Cheung, 2001). In this context, the teachers were provided with supplementary materials and an introductory workshop to raise their awareness about the principles of task-based language teaching. Introductory units and supplementary materials were added to the course to help learners recognize the course content and teaching approach. Integrating cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies into task-based courses may be particularly helpful for learners who are accustomed to teacher-fronted grammar-based courses. If learners are used to a "spoon-fed handout-based" teaching approach (Wiriyakarun, 2001, p. 59), then task-based courses need to teach them how to learn and how to evaluate what they are learning. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, simply encouraging learners to have greater independence may lead them to acquire inaccurate or inappropriate language forms. Task-based language teaching can foster independence while helping learners acquire the metacognitive strategies they need to monitor and evaluate the quality of their learning.

Third, the findings indicated that task-based courses should provide teachers with time to respond to their learners' needs as they arise incidentally. As described earlier, an important methodological principle of task-based language teaching is focus on form (Long, 2000), in which attention to language form is provided in response to learners' needs. However, teachers may not be able to address their learners' needs if they are required to complete a prescribed number of activities per lesson. If they feel pressure to follow a syllabus strictly, then they may not take opportunities to focus on the language forms that arise incidentally during each lesson. In the context reported on in this study, the revised course provided the teachers with time to respond to their learners' needs (through feedback, additional explanation, or further practice) by reducing the amount of material to be covered in each lesson.

This study provides a useful reminder about the importance of systematic evaluation for syllabus designers and curriculum developers who

are creating task-based courses (see, e.g., Watson Todd, 2006). The following general suggestions may serve as a checklist for administrators and instructors who are implementing and evaluating task-based courses, particularly in contexts where teachers are accustomed to following a synthetic syllabus and adopting a focus-on-forms approach.

Materials Development

An important issue is whether teachers create their own materials or obtain commercially available textbooks. If teachers select a commercial textbook, they should take care to ensure that the curriculum dictates the use of the textbook rather than allowing the textbook to dictate the content of the course. Although teachers may initially rely on their intuitions to sequence tasks, they may later draw on the impressions of teachers and learners who participate in a pilot course as a way to evaluate their sequencing decisions.

Teacher and Learner Preparation

Prior to implementing a task-based course, departments should provide multiple opportunities for teachers and learners to become familiar with the philosophy and principles of task-based language teaching. In particular, the role of grammar instruction in task-based language teaching should be highlighted so that teachers understand the difference between focus on form and focus on forms and learners can discuss their attitudes and expectations about explicit grammar instruction. When possible, teachers should be encouraged to observe pilot sections of the course or to watch videos of teachers implementing a similar task-based course and then discuss their role in anticipating, eliciting, and reacting to learner language. Learners should be provided with information about criterion-referenced, performance-based assessment so that they understand that course evaluation is based on how well they can perform tasks in the target language rather than how much knowledge they have about the target language's grammatical system.

Course Evaluation

Cycles of information gathering, analysis, and revision should be repeated both before and after a task-based course has been introduced. Multiple sources of data should be collected to identify teachers' reactions, learners' reactions, and measures of learning outcomes. When

teachers or learners have concerns with the course, those concerns may be addressed by revising the materials or the course or by changing the teacher or learner preparation activities. Once the course has been implemented, opportunities for self-reflection and peer observation should be provided so that teachers can develop awareness of their classroom routines and discuss the effectiveness of those routines with their peers.

CONCLUSION

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, relatively little research has investigated task-based courses as opposed to individual tasks. This study has made a modest contribution to understanding teachers' and learners' impressions of a task-based EFL course, but considerable research is still necessary to create a robust empirical base that L2 teachers can draw on when creating, implementing, and revising task-based courses. The findings reported in this article, of course, need to be interpreted with caution because the number of participants was relatively small. Because this case study was situated in a Thai university context, additional research carried out in different countries and educational settings is needed. Future research in the following areas can help L2 teachers design and implement task-based courses.

- *Learning outcomes:* How effective are task-based courses in promoting L2 learning? How can task-based language teaching be adapted to optimize learning outcomes in a wide variety of instructional contexts?
- *Teacher factors:* How do L2 teachers with different levels of experience and education interpret and implement task syllabi? How do they perceive their roles in task-based approaches and how do their perceptions influence their classroom practices? What types of teacher preparation workshops or training programs can help L2 teachers understand and adapt task-based approaches?
- *Learner factors:* How do L2 learners in different instructional contexts and from varying educational backgrounds respond to task-based teaching? How do their beliefs about language learning affect their perception of and participation in task-based courses? What can teachers do to help learners recognize the learning opportunities available in task-based courses?

These are the questions that guide our research as we continue to investigate the role of task-based language teaching in this Thai EFL con-

text. We believe that these types of empirical research will help L2 teachers and researchers clarify how task-based courses facilitate L2 learning and will provide them with the information they need to successfully implement task-based approaches in a variety of L2 instructional contexts.

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APPENDIX

Task syllabus

English 103 Foundation English I

Course description

This course is an integrated-skills, task-based English course in which learning strategies are explicitly introduced. It focuses on the development of English for communication in both social and academic settings. Learning strategies are explicitly introduced in order to promote learning both inside and outside the classroom. The course emphasizes using English to make personal statements and for interpersonal interaction.

Course objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to use spoken and written English to make personal statements, participate in social interaction, and for personal enjoyment and enrichment. They will also be able to use English to search, access and process information, and use learning strategies to extend their communicative competence.

Course content

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Content	Thai culture	Thai regional concerns	Thai television programs
Task	To apply for an international youth exchange program to foster cross-cultural understanding	To apply for a travel grant to attend an environmental awareness seminar about problems faced in different regions of Thailand	To propose a creative and constructive television program for Thai teens
Outcomes	Written personal profile and oral presentation about an aspect of Thai culture	Written summary and oral presentation about a change in a Thai province and suggested solutions	Written and oral description of a TV program including a biography of a possible host or guest

Course content (continued)

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Cognitive strategies	Vocabulary	Vocabulary	Vocabulary
	Using schema	Using schema	Using schema
	Using context clues	Using context clues	Using context clues
	Recording words	Reading	Reading
	Word analysis	Surveying	Surveying
Reading	Taking notes	Highlighting	Scanning
	Listening	Taking notes	Reading critically
		Specific information	Listening
	Taking notes	Specific information	Listening
Meta-cognitive strategies	Task analysis	Task analysis	Task analysis
	Self-evaluation	Self-evaluation	Self-evaluation
	Critical thinking	Critical thinking	Critical thinking
	Planning	Planning	Planning
	Language focus	Past tense forms	Verb tenses
	Participles	Conjunctions	Relative clauses
	Comparatives/ superlatives	Quantifiers	
		Word stress	

Course evaluation

Course grades are based on performance on the following criteria:	
Task performance	24%
Attendance/participation	20%
Portfolio (language notebook, quizzes, self-assessment)	16%
Final exam	40%

Course materials

Brewster, S., Davies, P., & Rogers, M. (2001). *Skyline 3*. Oxford: Macmillan.

Chaikitmongol, W., Hinmali, S. & Chinda, B. (2004). *Foundation English 103 Student Workbook*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Chiang Mai University.

Task assignments

Task One

The Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Program* would like to invite 30 Thai university students to join a 90-day cruise. They will travel with 40 teens from Japan and 270 teens from other Southeast Asian countries to visit all the participating countries and to learn about their culture and traditions. The purpose of this program is to promote friendship and cultural understanding among the youth of Japan and Southeast Asian countries. During the cruise the participants will have opportunities to meet local youth, stay with local families, visit tourist attractions, and engage in volunteer activities.

Interested?

Send in your CV and prepare a 2-minute oral presentation to introduce yourself, your reason(s) for joining the program, and an aspect of Thai culture that you'd like to share with the other participants.

Your teacher and friends in your English classroom will be on the screening committee to select the suitable applicants.

* Adapted from <http://www.asseay.org/sseayp.htm>

Task Two

*A vision without a task is a dream.
A task without a vision is drudgery.
But a vision with a task can change the world.*

Attributed to Black Elk (Oglala Sioux)

The Zones for Peace International Foundation (ZOPIF) is a non-profit organization with the vision of spreading a culture of peace around the world. The mission of ZOPIF is to assist the establishment of Zones of Peace by working with citizens, government officials, and religious, spiritual, and political leaders.

Many of the world's most precious areas are in great danger of destruction. War, social unrest and environmental destruction have already damaged many places around the world. Without protection, other areas of cultural and natural interest may be threatened, including

- ◆ Parks, monuments, and special buildings
- ◆ Libraries and museums
- ◆ Places of worship
- ◆ Holy cities
- ◆ Ancestral lands and burial grounds.

These places could belong to your own family heritage or your community.*

Program Announcement

This year a youth seminar will be held to encourage university students from all over the world to spread a culture of peace. The seminar participants will discuss recent changes in their community or country and the impact of those changes on their quality of life. Travel grants are being offered to help offset the costs of attending the seminar, and provide round trip airfare, housing and living expenses for the one-week seminar.

To apply for a travel grant

Write a short essay in which you describe an important change in your community or country. Be prepared to explain what has changed, how it represents a departure from the past, what may have caused the change. In addition, you should propose suggestions about how any negative effects triggered by the change can be overcome. The committee will review written proposals, and will invite finalists to give an oral presentation.

*Adapted from <http://zopif.org>

Task Three

B. TV, the newest cable channel in Thailand, is launching an English-language program for the new generation of Thai teens. We'd like to invite you to join our contest to create a new TV program. Prizes will be awarded for the best proposals.

Interested contestants must

- ◆ Be Thai citizens
- ◆ Be between 17–25 years old
- ◆ Work in teams
- ◆ Submit one written proposal
- ◆ Pitch their proposal to a selection committee

While proposals for all program types are encouraged, special consideration will be given to programs that are both creative and constructive, and provide information about a possible host/guest/actor for the program.