# Chapter 2

# Review of the Literature: Negotiated Syllabus

## 2.1 Introduction

The following literature review will attempt to highlight pertinent areas to the implementation and importance of a negotiated syllabus. First, it seeks to define the negotiated syllabus from both theoretical and empirical angles. It also examines the role of learner autonomy in a negotiated syllabus. Next it outlines the roles of the teacher and students within the negotiated syllabus and the role of the teacher as researcher. Lastly, it outlines some views of the implication of culture.

Teachers constantly have to learn how to deal with changing variables. These can range from class size, learner levels, and age of students to differing first languages and a variety of others. No learning environment is the same. Traditional approaches tended to treat students as homogenous and created few, if any, opportunities for individual needs. This started to change with the advent of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and has progressed to the point that learners are encouraged to create their own flexible syllabus.

## 2.2 Moving Towards the Negotiated Syllabus
### 2.2.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes came about in response to whether new language methods actually responded to learners' needs. Increasingly, English was needed for jobs and for immigrants to an English speaking country. There were more people who needed it to communicate instead of to pass a test or a class. (Richards, 2001) The focus for the ESP class was for the students to be able to perform specific tasks and not necessarily to pass a test (Richards, 2001).

As a result of this focus on specific purposes, "register analysis and discourse analysis [were used] to determine the linguistic characteristics of different disciplines…" (Richards, 2001, p. 30). Register analysis looked more at the sentence level to figure out what verb tenses were used or what kinds of vocabulary were more common in which discipline. Discourse analysis was "based on the analysis of units of organization within texts (e.g., narratives, instructions, reports, business letters)…" (Richards, 2001, p. 31).

The focus on the learner that ESP inspired also helped introduce needs analysis. Today, even in general English classes, teachers realize the importance of supplying a needs analysis. Teachers now use the needs analysis to collect information from students about a variety of things. These could include where they have gaps in

knowledge, what direction they think the class should go in, what they expect from the class, and how they want to use the language, to name a few.

## 2.2.2 Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching emerged as an approach that focused more on actual communication instead of sentence structure and grammar. CLT changed the way educators looked at "the nature of language, the nature of goals, objectives, and the syllabus in language teaching, and a search for an appropriate methodology in the light of these changes" (Richards, 2001, p. 36). Communicative approaches tend to be learner-centered because they focus on what students will do with the language not just on how it is formed.

## 2.2.3 Learner-centred approaches

As its name would suggest learner-centred approaches put more emphasis on the learner and the needs of the learner. Therefore, "information by and from learners is used in planning, implementing, and evaluating language programmes," (Nunan, 1989, p. 19). This approach also includes to an extent the means by which this information should be gathered. As Nunan (1988) states, "the key difference between learner-centered and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught" (p. 2). The idea of "collaborative effort' and the "decision-making process" take on a more tangible role in the negotiated syllabus where students and teachers work together to move ahead in the class.

## 2.3 The Negotiated Syllabus
## 2.3.1 Definition of the negotiated syllabus

A process syllabus is a commonly used name in the literature that can often refer to the same thing as a negotiated syllabus. Indeed, Breen and Littlejohn use both terms in their book. However, Nunan (1988) makes a distinction between product and process syllabuses defining a process syllabus as one that focuses on "the processes through which knowledge and skills might be gained," (p. 40). Therefore, the process syllabus can include procedural, task-based, content-based and the natural approach, in addition to the syllabus outlined by Breen and Littlejohn.

Throughout this paper a negotiated syllabus is seen as a type of process syllabus that uses a learner-centred approach. I view the term negotiated syllabus as more salient and dynamic since it identifies aspects important to the syllabus. These include the implication of more than one participant, in this case the teacher and student. It implies a sharing of ideas and the give and take inherent to a learner-centred classroom. In addition, it implies that the teacher views the students as equal and as directly involved in the outcomes of their learning. Lastly, it identifies the process that is used to carry out the syllabus.

## 2.3.2 Description of a negotiated syllabus

It is argued that students and teachers have separate agendas in the classroom. Students create or recreate their own "syllabus" as they learn (Benson, 2001). Due to this difference in the learners' and teacher's view of the syllabus, it is important to have a syllabus which is flexible and takes both views into account. "Candlin argued that any pre-designed syllabus was rendered redundant from the moment teacher and students began working and that the only genuine syllabus would be a retrospective account of what the work had covered and what had been achieved from it" (as cited in Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 18). Breen "proposed [a process syllabus] as a reference point for teachers who wished to engage students explicitly in evolving the actual curriculum of the classroom." (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 18) He also "proposed [it] in order to provide a framework for decision-making during teaching and learning in a classroom setting." (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 29)

Figure 1.

| "As a framework, a process syllabus identifies: <br> 1. the range of decisions that can be open to negotiation; <br> 2. the steps in a negotiation cycle; and <br> 3. the elements or levels in the classroom curriculum to which the negotiation cycle can be applied." (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 29) |
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As part of the framework Breen outlined he also identifies areas where teachers and students can negotiate and/or make shared decisions. The following range of decisions can be turned into questions, which the teacher and students then use to work out answers together:

Figure 2.

| Purposes of the students' work together; | Why are we learning the language? |
| --- | --- |
| Content or subject matter of their work; | What should be the focus of our work? |
| Various ways of working together; | How should the learning work be carried out? |
| Preferred means of evaluation of the efficiency and quality of the work and its outcomes so that new directions in the work can be identified | How well has the learning proceeded? |
| (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 30-31) | |

This negotiation is viewed as significant because "…it has been argued from the perspective of communicative language teaching that opportunities for overt negotiation about the classroom curriculum provide a springboard for the other forms of negotiation and for authentic language use about matters that are of immediate significance to learners" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 19).

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### 2.3.3 Principles of negotiation

Figure 3.

Principles that underlie the use of negotiation in the language classroom:
- Negotiation is a means for responsible membership of the classroom community.
- Negotiation can construct and reflect learning as an emancipatory process.
- Negotiation can activate the social and cultural resources of the classroom group.
- Negotiation enables learners to exercise their active agency in learning.
- Negotiation can enrich classroom discourse as a resource for language learning.
- Negotiation can inform and extend a teacher's pedagogic strategies.
(Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 19)

### 2.3.4 Negotiation and evaluation

"Initially, because they have little English, students go through the motions of self-evaluation. However, gradually their skills develop so that with time they can make pertinent and relevant comments about their learning and needs. Whereas evaluation was once the sole responsibility of the teacher, the student now sees that he or she also has a role in determining how he or she performs." (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 52)

### 2.4 Ethnographic Study On Negotiation in the ESL Classroom

For her thesis dissertation, Larrotta (2005) did an ethnographic study of a small, Hispanic, adult ESL class in Texas. Prior to her primary study she conducted a pilot study to test aspects she was hoping to research. The students in her primary study had a basic knowledge of English and the teacher spoke Spanish. In her study she implemented a negotiated syllabus and recorded 'the journey'. As part of her methodology she used student journals, teacher reflections, student interviews, student evaluations and documents from the classes. Her study adds to the body of knowledge as a guide for others who may want to incorporate negotiation in their class. It also gives a useful model for an ethnographic study to be carried out and implemented under different circumstances. Larrotta's study contributed to the current study specifically through the methodology. In addition it reinforced decisions to include student journals and provided the impetus for including more of the students' first language in my classes through translated materials.

## 2.5 Role of Learner Autonomy in a Negotiated Syllabus
### 2.5.1 Definition of learner autonomy
According to Benson, 'Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to take control over one's own learning..." where "...control over learning may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process." (Benson, 2001, p. 47)

### 2.5.2 Description of learner autonomy
Benson states "...an adequate description of autonomy in language learning should at least recognize the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content..." (Benson, 2001, p. 50) The first level, learning managements, takes as its basis the views of Holec:

> "One of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions of autonomy is found in Holec's (1981: 3) report to the Council of Europe, where autonomy is described as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. Holec elaborates on this basic definition as follows:
> To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:
> - determining the objectives;
> - defining the contents and progressions;
> - selecting methods and techniques to be used;
> - monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.)
> - evaluating what has been acquired.
> The autonomous learner is himself capable of making all these decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved."
> (Benson, 2001, p. 48)

The foundation of the second level, cognitive processes, is formed by the views of Little:

> "...Little (1991:3) argues that 'autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized':
> Essentially, autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. (Little, 1991: 4)
> (Benson, 2001, p. 49)

Lastly, Benson himself argues that "the content of learning should be freely determined by the learners." (Benson, 2001, p. 49) This forms the basis for the third level of learner control.

Also, Benson writes that "[a]mong the claims made for autonomy, three stand out as being equally important to theory and practice:
- The concept of autonomy is grounded in a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning. As such, autonomy is available to all...
- Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparation...
- Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning. In other words, the development of autonomy implies better language learning."
(Benson, 2001, p. 2)

Much early work focused on the learner as an individual however, "researchers on autonomy have emphasized that the development of autonomy necessarily implies collaboration and interdependence." (Benson, 2001, p. 12) There were "developing views of the classroom as a 'social context' and the idea that autonomy could be developed by a shift in relationships of power and control within the classroom." (Benson, 2001, p. 13) Work by Leni Dam and colleagues in schools in Denmark impacted how autonomy was viewed and "prompted a shift in the focus of research on autonomy in the 1990s towards issues of collaboration and negotiation." (Benson, 2001, p. 14) This also affected the role of the teacher moving to one who promotes autonomy and negotiation.

"Active learners taking initiative learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of their teachers' (Knowles, 1975:14)" (as cited in Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 57).

Autonomy, however, does have its constraints as mentioned by Little " 'learning can only proceed via interaction, so that the freedoms by which we recognize learner autonomy are always constrained by the learner's dependence on the support and cooperation of others'." (as cited by Benson, 2001, p.102)

An additional "constraint" can be seen by the likely need for teacher help. "Citing Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1990), Little (1991: 21) notes that 'the crucial trigger to total self-organization in learning' occurs at a stage of reflection at which the focus of attention shifts to the process of learning itself. Thomas and Harri-Augstein observe that most learners find it difficult to attain this stage on their own without professional assistance. This suggests that autonomy in language learning is unlikely to develop simply through the practice of self-directed learning in the absence of dialogue and the skilled assistance of teachers." (Benson, 2001, p. 43)

A constraint for researchers is that autonomy can be difficult to measure since it "...refers to the learner's broad approach to the learning process, rather than to a

particular mode of teaching or learning." (Benson, 2001, p. 1) This broad approach suggests that autonomy can only be measured over a long period of time.

### 2.5.3 Implications for the negotiated syllabus

Learner autonomy is relevant to a negotiated syllabus because the goals for autonomous learners are largely synonymous with the goals of a negotiated syllabus. The negotiated syllabus gives a direction for those who want to foster an autonomous spirit in their students. The negotiated syllabus represents a shift in focus from the teacher to the student. The teacher becomes a facilitator who encourages students in tasks that they are interested in and that they have negotiated. According to Booton and Benson (1996), some of the factors that are important for fostering autonomy "are the extent to which the system encourages and facilitates choice, the extent to which it is oriented towards the description of activities rather than materials and the transparency of the system to its users," (as cited in Benson, 2001, p. 119). Students who negotiated their own syllabus are likely to have a greater understanding of these areas since they are involved in all aspects from content, to evaluation, to classroom interaction.

Learner autonomy creates a standard by which to measure the negotiated syllabus. It is a behavior that the negotiated syllabus aims to foster, therefore, in an effort to measure the success of a negotiated syllabus one could also measure the instances of increased autonomy and see how these were fostered by the syllabus.

Another way to think of learner autonomy is that students take ownership of their learning. Taking ownership of their learning requires a gradual process. "When the student perceives his own need to take responsibility, the transfer of ownership can begin. The student...will somehow have to become aware that he needs to change, and that only he can make the changes...After the perception of need, a period of transition may be required in which the students begin to take hold of responsibility and wake up to the idea of organizing their own learning." (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986, p. 28)

### 2.6 Teacher and Learner Roles in the Negotiated Syllabus
### 2.6.1 Teacher roles

As a teacher implements a negotiated syllabus they have to change their thinking and practices. They have to challenge what they know and what they are comfortable with.

> "...any redistribution of power and decision-making within the classroom brings with it a redefinition of both teacher and learner roles. For teachers who are most used to attempting to exercise full control over classroom events...a move towards involving learners in decision-making may make new demands for flexibility, tolerance and risk-taking, and require a strong faith in the capacity of

learners. Such teachers may need to come to see their own plans for classroom work as simply proposals…which learners have the right to reformulate, elaborate upon or even reject. At the same time, such teachers need to be willing to suspend their own judgment over the suitability or value of drawing out and building upon the learners' own capacity to review and evaluate the work they have done…the ability to work successfully through negotiation is one which gradually develops with practice over time." (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 277)

Little corroborates this view when he "argues that in the process of assisting learners to become more autonomous in their learning, teachers must pay attention to their own personal constructs, per 'the assumptions, values and prejudices which determine their classroom behaviour' (as cited in Benson, 2001, p. 37).

As was previously mentioned, a teacher who sets out to implement a negotiated syllabus is likely hoping to encourage autonomous learners. Voller makes it more clear how teachers can promote this attribute in their learners.
> "Voller (1997: 112-13) [gives] three assumptions about teachers' roles in the development of autonomy:
> The first is that language is an interpretative process, and that an autonomous approach to learning requires a transfer of control to the learner. The second is to ensure that our teaching practices, within the external constraints imposed upon us, reflect these assumptions, by ensuring that they are based on a process of negotiation with learners. The third is to self-monitor our teaching, to observe and reflect upon the teaching strategies we use and the nature of the interactions we set up and participate in." (Benson, 2001, p. 15)

The impact that the teacher has on the students through the use of the negotiated syllabus can be seen from the definition of the role of the teacher in Freirean pedagogy which is 'to present knowledge in the form of problems that engage students in dialogue and reflection, leading to the analysis of their social realities for the purpose of transforming them." (Benson, 2001, p. 29)

The process of negotiating a syllabus does not only help the students to develop and grow, but it also helps the teacher to learn as the process unfolds. (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000) As the teacher learns more they present a model for their students of how learning is a life-long endeavor.

## 2.6.2 Learner roles
Learners may find the change difficult. Perhaps they have been conditioned to think of the teacher as having all the answers and as the one who should provide direction for the whole class. There may be resistance on the students' part to take over things seen as the teacher's job. (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 278) In addition, students may find a negotiated syllabus difficult because it may be more difficult to see progress without an end result like a test. They may not see the benefit of the process itself. As Breen and Littlejohn (2000) write, "…some…students want some tangible evidence

of making progress, of learning something, of getting somewhere, while the tutors see learning also in the process of negotiation itself" (p. 278). This can create misunderstandings between the teacher and students if it is not addressed. The students need to get glimpses of the value of learning through negotiation.

While negotiating a syllabus can create new learning opportunities, these also create frustrations for students if they are not prepared. Students must learn to see the classroom in a new way. They learn to see the roles of the teacher, themselves, and their classmates in a new light. Learners will most likely find that their attitude toward the classroom must change. In all likelihood, it will take time for learners to develop and overcome these changes. Students must get used to an environment that requires "risk-taking, flexibility and tolerance" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 278). They also must develop new abilities such as those required for "working in groups, analyzing, designing and evaluating classroom tasks, and sharing decision-making..." (p. 279) The way in which students respond to these changes and their "ability to successfully participate in shared decision-making can be seen as stages in the development of the learners' abilities in the management of learning, alongside other stages in the language-learning process." (p. 279)

## 2.6.3 Teacher as researcher

As a teacher, one should always be reflecting on what is happening in the class before, during and after a lesson. The teacher must seek to identify their students' needs by observation and other research tools such as learner diaries, interviews, or class videotape. Some teachers purposely research their classes in order to see how to best improve as a teacher, perhaps only through having someone else come to observe, or through more rigorous methods.

It can be argued that this is even more necessary for a teacher of a negotiated syllabus. In order to monitor the class, and ensure that students' needs are being addressed, the teacher may find it necessary to use many of the methods used when researching a class. They will have the opportunity of using this information as part of the on-going curriculum.

When gathering data for research, the teacher has a unique perspective on the class since they are with the students on a regular basis. They can also make use of their proximity to the students by using their intuition. Research helps us to articulate what we might already feel.

Spradley (1980) uses the term participant observation to illustrate what the teacher as researcher does in the classroom. According to him, there are six things that set the participant observer apart from the normal participant. First, the participant observer has a dual purpose. They must "engage in activities appropriate to the situation and ...observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54). Second, "participant observation requires the ethnographer to increase his or her awareness, to raise the level of attention, to tune in things usually tuned out" (p. 56). Third,

Spradley writes that the observer must take in a much wider spectrum of information than one is used to (p. 56). Fourth, the participant observer experiences situations as both an insider and outsider (p. 56). Fifth, the observer must increase introspectiveness (p. 57). Last, the observer will record what they have observed (p. 58). Spradley also outlines the level of involvement for the observer. They can range from nonparticipation to complete participation. Complete participation is good because you understand the rules and norms; however, Spradley warns that "[t]he less familiar you are with a social situation, the more you are able to see the tacit cultural rules at work" (p. 62). This advice is useful for the teacher researcher who may find herself very close to the situation and unable, sometimes, to objectively report on the scene by ignoring some signals.

While studying an EFL class, the cultural aspects can be very complex and make considerable contributions to the study. How does the researcher avoid imposing her own ideas on the study? According to Spradley the researcher must "set aside her belief in naïve realism, the almost universal belief that all people define the real world of objects, events, and living creatures in pretty much the same way" (p. 4). It is important, in order to truly understand, to try approach things from the native standpoint. The ethnographer must try to understand what the various aspects of the culture mean.

## 2.7 Cultural Implications of the Negotiated Syllabus
### 2.7.1 Impact of Culture on Negotiation
Students in Asia are stereotyped as being rote learners who rely on the teacher for all of the information they need. The impression is that they only learn for the tests and do not learn for the sake of learning. I'm sure to some extent this could be the case all over the world to one degree or another. Culture can be considered a very important part of the success or failure of a negotiated syllabus. The way students have learned in the past and the expectations they have for teachers can all be a result of culture, at least in part. Throughout the literature there are varying viewpoints on the impact culture has on a negotiated syllabus. As Breen and Littlejohn (2000) state, "While it is highly likely that cultural factors have a role to play in determining the potential of classroom negotiation, it is possible, however, to overstate the culture-specific nature of student reaction." (p. 280) It appears then, that there are other factors that would have more impact. This is not to discount culture as a contributor to the success or failure of a negotiated syllabus. However, we can use our knowledge of the culture to better implement the syllabus. According to Breen and Littlejohn, (2000) the success, or otherwise, of a negotiated syllabus would depend more on how the negotiation was implemented and not as much to the culture within which it is implemented.

## 2.7.2 Views on Negotiation in Asia
From the litereature, the stance towards a negotiated syllabus in an Asian setting appears to be cautionary or apprehensive rather than negative. Stances generally stem from the fact that communicative approaches, and therefore autonomous approaches

originated in the West. Benson writes, "...narrower definitions of autonomy and the practices associated with it that have grown up in European educational institutions may be entirely inappropriate elsewhere in the world." (Benson, 2001, p. 55) In the 1990s the idea of autonomy spread, encouraging discussion about the impact on Asian students (Benson, 2001).

Benson (2001) identifies further why it may be difficult to promote autonomy:
> "Similarly, Ho and Crookall (1995: 237) have argued:
>> Being autonomous often requires that students work independently of the teacher and this may entail shared decision making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher. It is, thus, easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable.
>> Doubts about the cultural appropriateness of the goal of autonomy for Asian students have been mainly based on a view of Asian cultures as collectivist and accepting of relations of power and authority (Littlewood, 1999)."(p. 55-56)

Not all views on autonomous learning in Asia are pessimistic. Some views are particularly encouraging for those working with students who are generally considered to be at a disadvantage. Benson (2001) gives another viewpoint, which is that "... the fundamental ideas of autonomy are in fact shared by diverse cultures. Kirtikara (1997), for example, argues that traditional rural learning in Thailand was autonomous and that some of the most noted Thai scholars were largely self-educated." (Benson, 2001, p. 56)

In addition, "The notion that autonomy is inimical to Asian learning cultures is also called into question by the reported success of several programmes designed to promote it." (Benson, 2001, p. 57)

One such program was put into practice at the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. This "curriculum model for autonomy...[drew] upon theories of communicative language teaching and the process syllabus..." (Benson, 2001, p.166,167). It was developed in English classes and "has been judged successful both by the institution that sponsors it and by outside visitors" (Benson, 2001, p. 167).

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter sought to present the relevant literature pertaining to the implementation of a negotiated curriculum in an adult ESL class in Chiang Mai, Thailand. First, the influences on the negotiated syllabus were addressed in order to place it in context. Specifically, the contributions made by English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Learner Centredness. English for Specific Purposes brought a shift in focus to the learner and the learner's reason for using the language. It also contributed through a more prominent use of Needs Analysis. Communicative Language Teaching broke away from traditional methods and focused on the use of the language instead of the grammar. Lastly, learner-

centredness stemmed from CLT and focused more on the learner. In this way, the class became more of a collaboration between teacher and students as students' needs were explored.

Second, the negotiated syllabus was defined and explained. The negotiated syllabus is meant as a framework for teachers to focus on putting the decisions that must be made in the class in the students' hands. The framework identifies three areas: the decisions that can be negotiated, the steps in the negotiation process, and the levels at which negotiation can be used (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In addition, Breen and Littlejohn outline principles that support a negotiated syllabus. These principles show the extent to which advocates of a negotiated syllabus hope to inspire their students to change their lives through learning.

Third, the ethnographic study that contributed to this study through its shared goals was briefly introduced. The author's desire to document a semester of her class and to record how the process unfolded was in keeping with the purposes of this study.
Fourth, learner autonomy was explored as a behavior, which can be encouraged by a negotiated syllabus. Learner autonomy was defined as students taking control of their own learning. In addition, the role of learner autonomy as a measure of the success of a negotiated syllabus was briefly explored.

The fifth area that was discussed was the roles of the teacher and students. Emphasis was placed on the changes that must occur in both teachers and students to effectively navigate a negotiated syllabus. The role of teacher-as-researcher was also explored.

The final area of pertinence is the effect that culture can have on the negotiated syllabus. There is not a definitive stance in the literature regarding the place of a negotiated syllabus in Asian cultures. A teacher should take culture into account as they try to take the needs of each of their students into account. Showing this sensitivity and tailoring classes accordingly does not have to mean doom for the negotiated syllabus.

As was seen with the negotiated syllabus and learner autonomy, nothing happens overnight and all is a process. How does this process unfold? The next chapter seeks to outline the methods used to document and glean answers about the process of negotiating a syllabus with learners.