

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

While teachers have reported on the use of a negotiated syllabus in an ESL classroom, research is scarce and there are few examples of a negotiated syllabus in an Asian context with beginner level students. In addition, attempts to implement a negotiated syllabus are often more narrow in nature, where teachers choose one area to negotiate or get student input on. This study was carried out in a small school in Northern Thailand in a beginner level English class with 10 students. It was also conducted with few outside constraints, making it possible to negotiate more areas. In order to comprehend the nature of a negotiated syllabus in this environment, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- a.) How does the process of implementing a negotiated syllabus unfold?
- b.) Do any themes emerge?
  - Are there patterns the students go through?
  - Are there patterns the teacher-researcher goes through?
- c.) What are students' reactions to this process?
  - How do the students feel?
  - Are there times they are uncomfortable?
  - Are there breakthroughs?
- d.) What cultural implications arise?
  - What cultural norms are challenged?
  - What cultural behaviors are challenged?
- e.) What challenges occur?
  - What challenges occur for me as a teacher?
  - What challenges occur for me as a teacher-researcher?
  - What challenges do the students have?
- f.) How are lesson plans structured to facilitate negotiation?
  - What activities are implemented? What is the impact of these activities?
  - How is the class structured so that it impacts negotiation? For example: group work vs. individual work, who is paired with whom, what is done to decrease teacher talk time.
  - How does the structure change over time?
- g.) At what point do students start taking ownership when their level is so low?
  - How is "ownership" defined in the context of this class?
  - What is it that students do to exhibit they have taken this step? What is the evidence that students have taken ownership of their learning?

### 3.2 Design and Assumptions

The study is a qualitative ethnographic study since it will follow a particular class and focus on its specific culture. According to Chaudron (1988) the approach to ethnographic research of a L2 is mostly concerned with “provid[ing] certain details or analyses of specific areas of interaction, which were observed and analyzed following qualitative and interpretive procedures.” (p. 46) This study seeks to provide as comprehensive a view as possible of a language classroom as it pertains to the negotiated syllabus. Two assumptions are made in this study. First, that students will be responsive on some level, either in a positive or negative way. Second, that students are making an effort in the class, unless I see evidence to the contrary. Finally, that much of their behavior, as it pertains to class, is attributable to a source I am familiar with, since I live with them on a daily basis.

### 3.3 Site

This study was performed at a small language school outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The students and teachers all live at the school. Students help with general upkeep in return for a free education. General tasks include working in the kitchen or at the farm. Students come for three years (if they finish the program) of which this study focuses on those in the first year. The school is staffed by volunteer teachers, primarily from the U.S. Teachers generally come for one year; however, this study took place during my third year with the school.

During the time of the study students were exposed to three native English speaking teachers throughout their classes of English (Reading, Writing, and Discussion), Bible Intro, Study Skills, Athletics, and Choir. The school also had two other teachers that taught at the upper levels.

Administration at the school is minimal, since it is so small. Teachers report to a head teacher (which is me, the researcher) who then reports to the Director of the school. Teachers are given a lot of leeway to conduct their classes as they see necessary. During the time of the study there were few students in the upper two years. Second year had two students and third year had only one.

#### 3.3.1 Classroom setting

The classroom is the large main room of the school, which is used as a classroom, eating area, and all-purpose room. It is open air and serves as the primary thoroughfare to the rest of the main building. Students and staff, however, make minimal disruptions to the class. It consists of a whiteboard and a world map. There is also the option of using a laptop and projector.

#### 3.3.2 School setting

Students have access to a range of books in the school library. These books are primarily in English, while some are written in students' native language. The English books include leveled readers, children's books, and reference books about science,

geography, art, etc written for young native English speaking readers. A very small number of the books include audio files. The school also has a small computer lab where students have access to a minimal variety of other listening materials.

Students board at the school. Girls live upstairs and each girl had her own bed, desk and chair. The desks are suitable for studying and hold books, papers, and a light. The boys live in two small houses outside the main building. They also each have their own beds and areas, but some boys had to share with two or three boys to a desk. In this case one boy would predominantly use the desk, while others found another place like the library or main room.

### 3.4 Participants

Eight students participated continuously in the study, while two others dropped out mid-term. Students had one semester of English prior to this study with the same teacher. This study started the second semester to allow the students more time to develop their English language abilities. Every year, students come in to the class with varying levels of English ability. Most of the students are usually at a beginner English level. Many students who come to this school have had between five and ten years of English in Thai schools, but do not have much English language ability. In addition, students come into the class with varying education levels. All of the students in this study finished Matayom 3 or the equivalent. None of the students had a university education, but a few of them went on to a Lahu bible school after completing Matayom 6. All of the students had knowledge of at least two languages (not counting English) prior to coming to this school. Generally they know their tribal language, such as Lahu, Karen and Kachin, in addition to the national language of Burmese or Thai. Students also have varying levels of the national language and even tribal language. Some have difficulty reading and writing in the national language, which makes it difficult to use dictionaries and other language helps. This could potentially create obstacles for students trying to learn and understand.

The students in this study ranged in age from 17-23 with one 28 year old. All of the students are Lahu except one Karen student and one Burmese Kachin student. The Lahu students came from rural areas of Northern Thailand, primarily Chiang Rai region. There were three girls and seven boys at the start of the study. All of the students in the first year English class were included in the study. (See Appendix A for Student Profiles.)

### 3.5 Instruments

Student dialogue journals. According to Creswell (2008) using journals is just one of the many ways to collect data. Students wrote in their dialogue journals approximately once a week. Every few weeks there was a question directly pertaining to the class and how the students felt about it. The remainder of the entries were negotiated. In this way, students would feel able to give their opinion in a non-threatening manner. The teacher was also able to give them constant feedback that

was meant to result in a frequent dialogue between teacher and student. (See Appendix B for the journal topics assigned.)

**Lesson plans.** Lesson plans were created by the teacher using information gleaned from negotiation with students in addition to personal expertise. Lesson plans consisted of a loose outline of the lesson. Some lesson plans were written retroactively. Every effort was made to plan for each class while allowing for room to adjust to perceived student needs. Lesson plans for every class were analyzed to see what the intentions of the lesson were and then compared with the teacher reflections. The lesson plans were useful to put everything in context.

**Teacher reflections.** After every class the teacher reflected on what worked and what didn't work, in addition to comments on students and reflections of students' response to the class. Notes were jotted down periodically during class and used to jog my memory later on.

**Student and teacher evaluations.** In the middle and at the end of the semester, both the teacher and the students were evaluated. The students evaluated the teacher and themselves. The teacher verbally followed up with students about their responses. In this way I hoped to align our expectations and get a clearer idea of how the students see the class. In addition, ideas could be gleaned from the mid-semester evaluation that could help with further negotiation of the course. The questions on the evaluation form were created by the teacher. Questions from the student-to-self evaluation were: "Do you think you improved in this class?", "How many hours do you study for this class each week?", "Which topics did you enjoy learning?", and "Which activities did you enjoy?". Example questions from the student-to-teacher evaluation include: "Do I answer your questions?", "Am I available to help outside class?", and "Write one thing you would like me to help you with." Students checked boxes in a list of potential responses, checked yes or no, or wrote a short answer. There were only nine questions because the English level was low. However, students were allowed to write comments in their native language.

When students evaluated themselves, they were asked about their improvement to see affective characteristics. Were they getting discouraged? Did they feel like they could see some progress? Students were asked how much they study to determine if they were putting in the necessary amount of time to get desired results. Lastly, students were asked what topics and activities they enjoyed so that this information could be used for future planning of the class.

On the student-to-teacher evaluation students were asked questions to see how I could improve. Specifically I wanted to pinpoint whether or not students were getting their questions answered. I also wanted to understand the best way that I could help them

and if they felt that I was accessible for help. (See Appendix C for the Evaluation Form.)

**Interviews.** Students had informal interviews with the teacher four times in the semester. During these interviews we discussed their view of the class and addressed any issues that arose. These interviews also gave insights into areas where they were uncomfortable or didn't understand. Lastly, they gave an opportunity to take note of areas to improve on in terms of students' speaking and listening skills.

**Direct observation.** The teacher/researcher directly observed students and how they responded to the syllabus throughout every class. In the middle of the term a native English-speaking teacher, as well as a Thai-speaking teacher (who knows English), were also asked to observe in order to gather a new perspective. The teachers observed simultaneously for one class period. The teachers were supplied with an identical set of questions to respond to as they observed the class. These questions were obtained from an observation form used by University of London and then heavily adapted for my purposes. (See Appendix D for the Observation Form.) Through these observations the teacher/researcher was able to compare the reflections from the day to those of the outside observers. These outside observers were used to help alleviate teacher bias. Also, the two cultural perspectives could provide extra insight into the class.

Each of these instruments served to check and balance the others, giving as full and unbiased a picture as possible. As research progressed, information about student preferences was used in subsequent lessons and aided the teacher when planning. Information that was primarily used in this way included student preferences about lesson content or ways that I could help them to improve. Students feelings were also taken into account to try to find areas to help encourage them. For example, when I found out that a student felt they weren't improving in a certain area and I felt they were, I could show them how they were improving by comparing something they had to difficulty with before, to what they were trying to do at that time. Also, I incorporated student feedback about my teaching into future classes. This study was opposite of a controlled experiment and remained dynamic and changing throughout the process.

### 3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected in the following ways:

#### 3.6.1 On-going

Participation in the setting. The researcher was a daily, active participant in the class as the teacher. The researcher executed the plan in negotiation with the students. In addition, the researcher was also able to provide insights from outside the class as one who lives in close proximity to the students.

Lesson plans and teacher reflections. These were documented for nearly every class. The teacher reflections were written as both a retroactive syllabus and as documentation of how students and teacher responded to the class.

### 3.6.2 Weekly dialogue journals

The student journals were collected approximately every week in order to get constant feedback from students. They were also used to identify areas of improvement and that needed more attention. Since the class was a beginner level class the journals provided an area for students to negotiate topics for their writing, while not being threatening.

### 3.6.3 Periodic interviews

During these interviews students were encouraged to share how they felt about the class and areas where they needed more help. These lasted approximately 15 minutes but went as long as the student wanted or until I felt that I had gotten sufficient information.

### 3.6.4 Mid-term and end of term evaluations and observations

By mid-term it was beneficial to use the evaluations from students to make adjustments as necessary with the class. The observations at this point were useful for the teacher researcher to make sure that her perspective was corroborated by other perspectives. If not, then future reflections on the class were adjusted accordingly.

## 3.7 Data Analysis Strategies

Creswell (2008) outlines several steps in the process of analyzing data to arrive at results. In a qualitative study the researcher will collect data, prepare the data for analysis, read the data for a general sense (this could include memos about what the researcher thinks of the data), and code the data for the themes that emerge as well as descriptive information. This is not a linear process. The researcher may find information, code that information, and based on the emerging themes, find new information. In this study the data was analyzed using this approach. Initially the data was analysed based on the following three categories: themes that emerge from the data, answers to my guiding questions, and by student to view responses in context.

As the data was analysed, it was necessary to answer or respond to the guiding questions as well as:

- How do the findings corroborate or differ from the literature and theory?
- Is it consistent with others who have implemented a negotiated curriculum?
- How can this be extrapolated to other contexts?

### 3.8 Methods of Achieving Reliability and Validity

#### 3.8.1 Explicit methodology, analysis, and results

External reliability is increased in this study by a thorough presentation of the data. According to Nunan it “can be enhanced if the ethnographer is explicit about...the status of the researcher, the choice of informants, the social situations and conditions, the analytic constructs and premises, and the methods of data collection and analysis.” (1992) In-depth teacher records were kept through the journal, lesson plans, student documents, and student interviews. External validity can also be strengthened through these methods.

#### 3.8.2 Length of the study

The study was conducted throughout the second semester, which totaled 17 weeks and 51 lessons. In this way, time was allowed for themes to emerge and a sufficient amount of data to exist to enable others to reanalyze and come to similar conclusions (Nunan, 1992), thereby increasing its internal reliability.

#### 3.8.3 Teacher-as-researcher

According to LeCompte and Goetz, “the ethnographer’s common practice of living among participants and collecting data from long periods provides opportunities for continual data analysis and comparison to refine constructs...” (as cited in Nunan, 1992, p.62). This can also increase the internal validity.

#### 3.8.4 Triangulation of data

The reliability is increased if you have more than one source of data (Wallace, 1998). In this study this is achieved through the triangulation of:  
Teacher/Students/Documents, allowing different points of view.

### 3.9 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to enable the reader to visualize the design of the study. The study is an ethnographic study that seeks to show how a negotiated syllabus was carried out. The participants in the study go to a school where students live and work, while taking classes in primarily English, Bible and Study Skills. The class size was small with only eight students by the end of the course. The class consisted of students who come from the hill tribes of Burma and Thailand. In order to get as much information as possible from different sources, I chose to use many instruments including: dialogue journals, lesson plans, teacher reflections, student and teacher evaluations, interviews, and direct observation. Teacher reflections and observations were conducted on an on-going basis, while students wrote in journals approximately every week, met with the teacher four times and at different points, and participated in evaluations at the middle of the term. Observations by two outside teachers were also conducted in the middle of the semester. With the intention of trying to understand all the data, it was analyzed according to Cresweil (2008). Initially data was looked through to get an idea of the whole, memos were written in margins, then it was coded to identify themes and useful descriptions. Since an

ethnographic study is highly subjective, it is important to achieve reliability and validity where possible. To this end, the chapter finished off with ways that this research seeks to meet the requirements for a reliable and valid study. In the next chapter, I will outline the results of the research according to my guiding questions.

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