

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Evaluating the Process of Syllabus Negotiation

5.1.1 Strong negotiated syllabus versus weak negotiated syllabus

A negotiated syllabus contains numerous elements that could be incorporated into any type or level of class, representing the weak version. This study tried to allow for a whole range of negotiated decisions, reflecting the strong version of the syllabus. The success of this was varied. This range of decisions gave an opportunity for deciding on aspects to continue with or discard in future classes in the same context. There are two ways to look at the extent this approach worked in the class. Experimenting with negotiation in the four areas outlined by Breen and Littlejohn (see section 2.3.2) gave a stronger foundation for which decisions to negotiate in the future (see Table 7). The other way to look at the approach was the effect on the curriculum and classroom organization. From this perspective attempting to negotiate using the strong version was challenging.

Although the result is not surprising, it is not practical to use a strong version of the syllabus with beginner learners who are learning in English and not in their L1. There are too many challenges present within a strong negotiated syllabus without adding in a language barrier. Some of these include students' needs versus the teachers' perceived needs, which is based on research and knowledge of the language. Also, getting students to be responsible and monitor themselves. There are, however, some aspects of this context that make a strong negotiated syllabus easier than others. One is that students may actually be more open to a change in the roles of teacher and students when they are faced with a situation outside of their cultural context. This is discussed more comprehensively in section 5.2.2.

As discussed in section 2.3.2, Breen and Littlejohn outline four main areas of decisions that can be negotiated. These include: purpose, content, how students work together, and assessment. In this class, since the aim was a strong negotiated syllabus, the students gave input in all four areas. While this was useful from a learning standpoint, in the future I would introduce students to each of these in phases instead of all at once. Indeed, Breen's proposal for the negotiated syllabus was to create a "reference point" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 18) and "framework for decision-making" (p. 29), thereby allowing the teacher to use the elements that are best for the class.

Table 7: Class focus: Possible phases of negotiation

Weeks 1 & 2	Focus students' attention on why; What is the purpose of what they are learning?
Weeks 3 & 4	Focus students' attention on what; What do they want to learn? content
Weeks 5 & 6	Focus students' attention on how; How do they want to learn? How do they think they will learn best? group work vs individual
Weeks 7 & 8	Focus students' attention on results; How do they want to measure these results? assessment

In this way it would be easier to have a plan while still introducing students to the different aspects of negotiation.

5.1.2 Effect of the teacher-as-researcher on the study

One of the unforeseen themes that emerge in the study are the affective attributes of both the teacher and students. While it is easy to comprehend some amount of feelings on the part of both teacher and students, the data showed a very strong presence of affective attributes both positive and negative. Trying to implement a strong negotiated syllabus is both stressful and time-consuming. It is stressful as one tries to be prepared (make decisions) while allowing students to make decisions. Implementing a negotiated syllabus with beginners adds to the amount of feeling that goes into every class because of the lack of understanding on the part of the students (as discussed in section 5.2.3.). In addition, it is time consuming to try to meet student needs on a more individual basis. The data showed many feelings of frustration as I tried to implement the syllabus and this level of emotional involvement makes it even more difficult to be a teacher-researcher. It can become difficult to look through the feelings to the heart of the problem and to the process itself. While this was a drawback to being a teacher-researcher and added stress to both roles, the teacher-researcher has such a unique vantage point that it makes other contributions possible.

5.2 Evaluating the Results of the Negotiated Syllabus

Numerous studies are presented in Breen and Littlejohn (2000) outlining the value of negotiated elements in a classroom. This study corroborates those. Adding negotiation is certainly positive. The difference lies in how much to negotiate and in how to introduce what is negotiated. Several aspects of the present study made negotiations difficult, while some of those same aspects contributed to new insights about what is important in the classroom and the impact certain elements can have on negotiating the syllabus. One area that highlights this tension is the level of English that is necessary for negotiation.

5.2.1 Minimum level of English needed for negotiation

Since the present study had first year students (beginner level) in the class, it was difficult to understand what they might want. Some aspects of negotiation, such as the purpose for learning the language, were asked in a structured way and students were able to respond in the language of their choice. Allowing this choice did not mean a significant increase in information, however. Many other decisions were asked in class as a response to something else in class. This is indicative of a negotiated syllabus or even just student-centred learning, but complete answers were hard to get. In addition, it was difficult to respond to an answer on the part of students. While they may have stated their opinion or desire, answering them effectively was a challenge.

Although it was difficult to carry out the study with this limitation, it did not impede students who wanted to take more control of their learning. Perhaps having the opportunity so often to give their opinion led them to start looking for ways they could learn. A pattern did not emerge among the top of the class showing a stronger inclination for autonomous learning. In fact incidences were spaced evenly along the spectrum with prominent examples at the top and bottom. This is outlined more thoroughly in the case studies of Niran and Sakda.

5.2.2 Ability of English to enable a departure from cultural norms

Although students in this part of the world have a reputation for rote learning and looking to the teacher for all the answers (see section 2.7.1), this study was conducted with first year students as a way to bypass that mentality. It is supposed that students coming to this school anticipated a different learning environment because it is run by foreigners. In this frame of mind it was practical to expose students to an autonomous structure in some form from the start. The data do not show a resistance on the part of students. Indeed, students seemed to enjoy the structure of classes when they understood what was happening.

In addition, it is possible that students thought of English as a language “outside” the typical rote learning method. Students may have associated Thai or Burmese with a teacher-centred classroom and rote memorization. Perhaps they felt a freedom to embrace a new style of learning and responding through English as the language of acquisition and instruction. This corroborates one of the principles proposed by Breen and Littlejohn whereby the negotiated syllabus can be an “emancipatory process” (2000, p. 19). Observation showed a possible inclination towards expressing more honest and critical assessments of the class when they used English. However, this is not explicit in the data. This is attributable to the cultural norm of not being critical of a teacher. As the class went on students seemed more comfortable assessing me critically and, sometimes, negatively. This can be viewed in a positive light and a possible effect of language giving them access to another way or feeling, or another cultural aspect. Having students write about the class, or their feelings about the class in both English and their L1 (particularly Thai) could have shown more insights into this.

5.2.3 English as primary language of instruction

Using English as the primary language of instruction hindered negotiation in the class. It made it difficult to incorporate what students wanted in class because it was too difficult to explain. It also made it hard to share the purpose for the lesson, which is considered so important, especially to adult learners. Using English as the primary language required scaffolding of plans that was difficult to manage if the class was to respond to student needs and guided by students decisions.

There were, however, necessary and positive aspects of using primarily English in class. It created a level playing field for students who speak different L1s and it created authentic language that students were compelled to decipher.

5.2.4 Expectations of the teacher

One result of some of the aforementioned challenges was that it was difficult to meet expectations placed on the teacher. These expectations were placed by encouraging negotiation and student-centred learning. There is a responsibility inherent in fostering student involvement, opinion, and collaboration. The teacher must be prepared to deal with the repercussions. Student opinion is important, especially in a strong version of the negotiated syllabus. Within that context students should be encouraged to have ideas and act on those ideas. Unfortunately, this places the teacher in a complex role of trying to help students reach their myriad and perhaps challenging goals. In some instances the teacher may find herself unable to guide and direct the student as needed because of a lack of knowledge on the topic or a lack of resources. This leaves the teacher in a position to disappoint and potentially discourage a student from trying to broaden their learning. It is important to take this into consideration when implementing a language plan that is so heavily based on student opinion and preference. In a more advanced class issues like this could be negotiating and students would understand, but in a beginner class that is unlikely to happen.

Another area where students have expectations for the teacher is as the one to set the tone or mood for the class. This seems especially important as students are faced with a learning experience that is new to them. In addition, since the negotiated syllabus is challenging to implement students are in need of extra encouragement and guidance. As the teacher trying to negotiate the syllabus and meet student demands that were difficult to interpret it was a challenge to walk in every day and feeling like I loved to be there. Part of the reason for this was the uncertainty of what would happen in class. Although it is a challenge, it is vitally important for the teacher to set a positive and encouraging tone in order for students to thrive and for the teacher and students to connect.

5.2.5 Inter-connected results – Student verbal responses

Throughout the study it became clear that straightforward results would be difficult to obtain because so there were so many variables. Many ideas could have several interpretations.

One common problem throughout the term was getting students to talk and answer questions. This was frustrating for me since I had hoped to be doing less talking as a result of the negotiated syllabus. The data seemed to show a connection between affective attributes such as sad, lazy, “not understand” (perhaps discouraged), and not fun, and their reticence to talk. In addition, their negative feelings seemed to stem from not understanding because everything was in English. Other pieces of data show that students didn’t talk even when they did understand the question. It is unclear what occurred first to set off a potential chain of events.

Still another explanation for their silence could be cultural, since the teacher is the one that should share knowledge and not the students. As the teacher and a foreigner I was interested in asking students legitimate questions to gain insight into the local culture. Students may have found the questions confusing or may not have even viewed them as real questions at all, since the teacher should have the answers and not the students.

Finally, another possibility is that students were shy and afraid of making mistakes. Although I made an effort to create a comfortable environment where students did not feel threatened, they may not have understood that they were welcome to make mistakes as part of the learning process.

In all likelihood their lack of spoken English in class resulted from the aforementioned reasons and probably more. Noticing, however, that their lack of response could have been due in part to affective attributes on the teachers’ side, gives room for improvement in the area of remaining positive and encourage to students regardless of how one feels about the progress and effectiveness of the class.

5.2.6 Possible impact on students

The negotiated syllabus is meant to help students as much as possible. It aims to create an atmosphere where students are consistently being pushed and having to push themselves to progress and learn. Since the aim it to assist students in their learning, to what extent did the current syllabus reach that goal?

Data show that students all took some responsibility at some point or other without the teacher instigating the event. It also shows a body of students who progressively got better at giving their opinion, whether positive or negative. There is also evidence to support that students began to think more about what activities would help them in their learning. Students could also critique the class and pinpoint areas of improvement.

In some respects students had higher and broader expectations of the teacher as the term progressed. This could be attributed to their realization that the role of a teacher can also include being a guide. As a guide students expected more even as they tried to find their way to learning new things.

5.3 Lessons Learned: Syllabus and lesson plans

Use of students' L1

Although speaking the L1 wasn't practicable, creating key documents and assignments in the L1 can help students understand the overall purpose for the class and explain the reason for asking for student opinion about what to teach next or how they want to be assessed, for example. Explaining these things on a syllabus in the L1 can be useful.

It is also good to identify areas of instruction in the class that are difficult to teach in English. One area is grammar. Have handouts of grammar exercises with explanations in the L1.

Structure

Although this study focused on the strong negotiated syllabus, it became clear that a more efficient way for beginner level students would include elements of structure. Two routines that became important were sustained silent reading (SSR) and handing journals every week.

To create more appropriate lesson plans for this group it is necessary to:

- Have a plan or outline so that you can walk students through the steps and aid in their understanding.
- Know what is important to write on the board and what is not so that students do not waste their time and attention copying notes
- Have at least some objectives of what to accomplish even if it is general so that everyone can feel a sense of having learned something
- Have a list of good activity ideas for this level (See Table 8 for examples.)

Table 8: Activities that were well-received by students

Students contributed the most to these activities and also had more of a tendency to expand on them to bring them more to their language level.

- Playing songs and have students put in a category
- Reading poetry aloud
- Travel phrases from a travel guide
- Brainstorming: jobs, countries, costs for a budget..
- Pair activities: describing simple pictures
- Brainstorming ideas for living in the city vs. living in the country
- Reading about learning languages
- Props: fruit, using the fruit in places around the room for prepositions
- Pairs: Having students find examples of new grammar in their books

Table 8: Activities that were well-received by students (continued)

- Giving directions worksheet with a map
- Food & Culture – almost any activity
- Having different groups responsible for different aspects of grammar review at the end of the semester – then teach the whole class
- Venn Diagrams – for almost anything within their vocabulary
- Character quotations to help them review important things from a book
- Describing characters
- Using an English song to teach vocabulary and pronunciation

Teaching methods

As the semester progressed there were methods that helped make class go more smoothly and aided in student understanding. Using some of these consistently helped to speed up class time and even, occasionally, encourage students' verbal responses.

Table 9: Teaching methods that were well-received by students

- Going through examples of the homework
- Leaving a really long pause when no one answered (the pause time got shorter over time as students answered more quickly)
- Mimicking what to do/not to do
- Picking group names out of a bowl instead of choosing students myself
- Choosing authentic materials that are not too daunting
- Giving clear directions with a modelled example

Some things that were well-received were difficult to master. For example, giving good examples or modelling tasks for students can be counter-productive if they use that model precisely and it limits their creativity. Over the course of the term I realized that it was generally more important for students to have a good example to understand.

One area that was difficult was knowing how to help students catch up with the class. An important thing to distinguish is when and how to help struggling students. One on one attention at the beginning of the year could potentially save a lot of time, both in class and out, by the end of the year.

5.4 Implications for Further Research

Much of the current literature on the negotiated syllabus is done with learners who are beyond the beginner level in English. Most studies also focus on aspects of negotiation in the class but not a strong negotiated syllabus. In addition, much of the literature and research focuses on classes in a western context. This study was undertaken to document the process with a beginner level adult class in Thailand. In this class a negotiated syllabus was attempted which would include negotiating in the four main areas: purpose, content, group configurations and assessment.

The present study poses questions that could be studied more in depth. The present research design can be modified to garner more information. Changing the level of learners alone would presumably give more insight into cultural aspects and any number of other areas where students' responses and reactions are necessary. In addition, a study with the teacher and students sharing the same L1 could give insight into the possibility that the change in language can lead to a change in how the student expresses him- or herself. Using this design with a measurable component such as gauging students' views on autonomy and comparing those views from the beginning to the end of the class may prove insightful.

Lastly, this study, while made more challenging with beginner learners, shows that their capacity and willingness for negotiation exists. Modifications in the approach to the negotiated syllabus through the use of more translated materials and further efforts to provide guidance as students navigate their own learning may also prove beneficial.