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Implementing a Negotiated Syllabus in the ELA Classroom

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Abstract

Language teaching has no shortage of literature on the design and development of syllabi by and for teachers. This paper will report on the author's experience of introducing a negotiated syllabus into the ARW classroom. This was the author's attempt to give students greater involvement in the teaching process, to better address their needs, and to try to engage and motivate the students in what is often a semester beset with jaded attitudes. A literature review is followed by the aims and rationale of the experiment. After examining how the activity was implemented, the paper goes on to discuss the successes and drawbacks of the activity and finishes by detailing some ideas for a more successful implementation in the classroom. While far from an empirical study, the overall student response seemed to indicate that there is much to be gained from teachers adopting some form of negotiated syllabus, as it allows students the opportunity to take a more learner-centred approach to the syllabus and increases both student engagement and motivation. At the very least the negotiated syllabus provides students with a more detailed introduction to the materials and topics to be studied.

Literature Review

The traditional syllabus has been described as being:

> concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners. They have, traditionally, the mark of authority. They are concerned with the achievement of ends, often, though not always, associated with the pursuance of particular means. (Candlin, 1984, p.30).

A more straightforward definition is given by Nunan (1988) as, "what is to be taught in a language program and the order in which it is to be taught" (p.159). The idea of what a syllabus should be has undergone radical change in the last 50 years with the advent of the communicative era in English Language Teaching (ELT) and the emphasis it placed on the adoption of a more communicative classroom environment where teachers and learners work together to negotiate outcomes. As far as syllabi were concerned this meant a focus on a more learner-centred curriculum, resulting in a shift away from the Product-oriented syllabus (where the product of language learning is emphasized) to a more Process-oriented syllabus (where the focus is on the learning process itself). White (1988) categorized these as Type A and Type B syllabi, the former being one in which all authority in the design and content comes from the teacher, and the latter one where the teacher and learner take a joint role in

the decision-making process. This Type B syllabus has come to be known as the 'negotiated syllabus' and differs from traditional syllabi in that it results from "the discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organized" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p.1). Candlin (1984) argued that when negotiating a syllabus the 'why' the 'how' and the 'what' should all be open to negotiation. This negotiation can take place at any level of the education process – from negotiation over the nature of individual tasks to learner input on a series of lessons all the way through to both teacher and learner making negotiated decisions on the wider curriculum. As to the efficacy of the negotiated syllabus, Breen (2000) argues that its reflective and interactive nature develops more motivated and committed learners, and there is much further research advocating the merits of a negotiated syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Nguyen, 2010). It must be noted that for the purposes of this paper, the term 'syllabus' and 'curriculum' are taken to be synonymous as they are often used interchangeably in academia (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006).

Levels of Student Participation in Syllabus Negotiation

Figure 1 shows Bovill and Bulley's Ladder of Student Participation in Curriculum Design (2011) and illustrates the varying levels of control that teachers can cede to learners when deciding to implement a negotiated syllabus. How much priority should be given to learner's needs is a contentious issue, with Clarke (1991) stating that at its most extreme (the topmost rung of the ladder) a negotiated syllabus would be "for all practical purposes unworkable in any other circumstances than with a very small group or in a one to one situation" (p.13). However, as Bovill and Bulley themselves point out, teachers do not always need to aim for the top of the ladder but, when considering how active a role to give learners in syllabus design, should take into consideration both individual and institutional constraints.

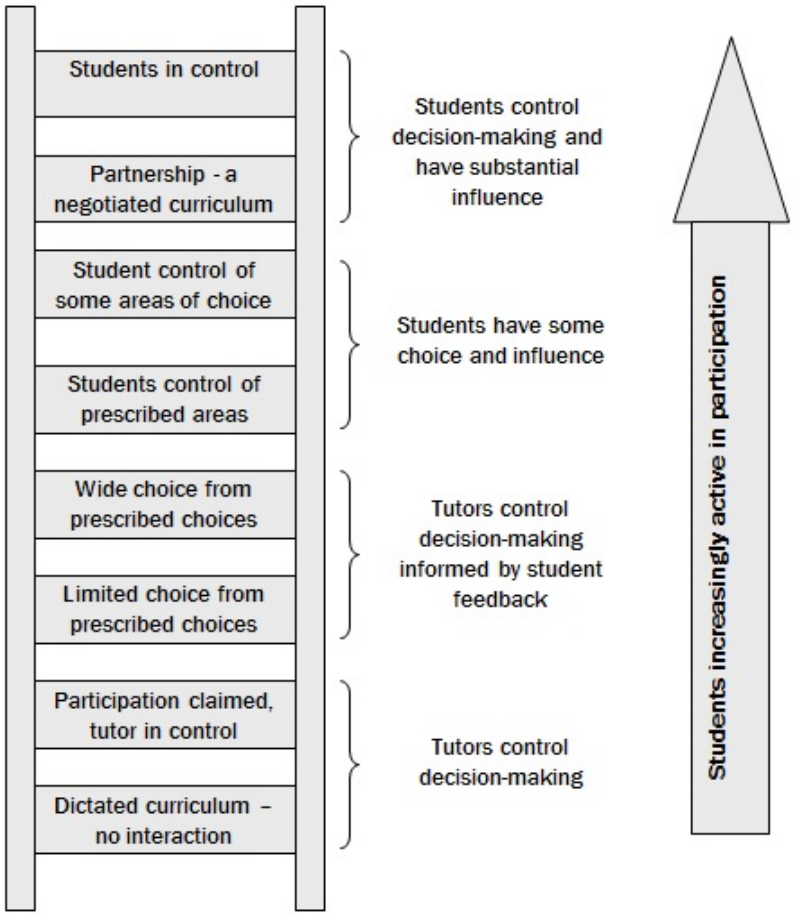

Figure 1. Ladder of Student Participation in Curriculum Design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p. 5)

Rationale

The author has noted from personal observation that learner motivation dips in the second semester, which is only reasonable. The enthusiasm and motivation of first semester students can easily be sapped by a long summer and the notion that they are in for 'more of the same' upon their return at the start of the fall. And while the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) instructor may do their best to keep students motivated via group work and the setting of relevant and challenging tasks, there is no doubt that the more motivated students are the better. During the first class in the semester a lack of interest in, and a passive acceptance of the syllabus was noted. According to Nation and Macalister (2010) having learners participate in the design of the syllabus enhances both intrinsic motivation as well as the feeling of being a stakeholder in the course.

The author decided to introduce a negotiated syllabus in the hopes that through increased participation in the learning process greater autonomy in the students would be fostered which would in turn increase their intrinsic motivation. It was also felt, that even if no noticeable change in motivation occurred, the process of negotiating the syllabus would, at the very least, afford the author greater insight into the areas in which students felt their needs were not being served. A final rationale for the implementation was that the hope that the very fact that students would spend time looking at the syllabus in detail would result in a greater awareness of what they are expected to achieve in the ELA.

Implementation

This section will describe the introduction of a quasi-negotiated syllabus in the 2016 fall semester of the Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) course. After the first class of the semester, (in which the syllabus was indifferently received) it was decided by the author to have the students take part in negotiating the syllabus. The syllabus was given to students again in the second class of the semester accompanied by an explanation of the different roles that a syllabus could fulfill. It was explained to the students what they were expected to learn over the next ten weeks, why they were expected to learn it, and how it was proposed to be taught. It was then explained to the students that in order for them to start to take more of an active role in their learning their input was being solicited and they were being encouraged to suggest modifications to the syllabus. Students were assured their suggestions would be taken seriously by the author and incorporated into the syllabus where possible. With these points in mind, students were instructed to go over the syllabus again and discuss in small groups whether or not they felt their expectations or targets were different from those listed. Specific instructions were given to students as to which parts of the syllabus were up for negotiation. For example, students were told that some aspects of the syllabus were non-negotiable such as the prescribed readings, the content of the Course Wide Test, Lectures for Liberal Arts (LLA) and the assessment mark given for essays and the Course Wide Test. However, not all aspects of assessment were off-limits; for instance, negotiation of what the Participation and the Section Specific grades should be based upon was open for discussion. Essay draft deadlines as well as what elements of the writing process were introduced in the classroom were also negotiable. Before starting the negotiation students were asked to discuss interesting teachers, lessons, and activities they had experienced in the past. This produced ideas that ran the gamut of new approaches in ELT; using Social Networking Service (SNS) sites, making student podcasts, and introducing drama in the classroom. This discussion was used to then brainstorm a list of ideas about how the content of the syllabus might be taught and these ideas were written on the blackboard for easy consultation during the upcoming discussions. Finally, students were cautioned to keep in mind that, when considering making radical changes, what might be desirable was often not the same thing as what was in fact possible. Students then spent about 25 minutes in groups discussing changes they might make to the syllabus and writing their ideas down. After the 25 minutes were up, groups were arranged into new groups and asked to share what they had done. Students then returned to their original groups and spent five minutes incorporating new ideas into, and editing their documents. The class then spent 10 minutes in a whole class discussion sharing and informally voting on ideas. This whole class discussion proved vital as it allowed the class the opportunity to hear and react to all the opinions of their peers.

Results

Regarding participation, the amount of student participation ranged from rungs three to six on Bovill and Bulley's Ladder of Student Participation (2011) in Figure 1. One of the most significant results to arise from the syllabus negotiation was the number of students who said that they wanted more opportunities to complete assignments together. The most requested change to the syllabus was for some kind of group or section project. When asked about this, students replied that they enjoyed the collaborative nature of these tasks, and felt that they learned more and experienced less pressure when working with others towards the

same goal. To this end it was suggested by the author (and accepted by the students) that half of the students' Section Specific grade would be based on a group presentation on the semester topic and that the other half would be based on a pair poster presentation. Students also requested that they be allowed to spend more time on certain parts of the writing process than on others. For example, they wanted to spend less time on learning how to make correct in-text citations (arguing that the Internet had several tools which did this automatically) and more time on learning how to structure arguments and respond to counter-arguments. Another idea put forward by many of the groups was for more of the readings to be done using the 'jigsaw method' (again opting for doing things collaboratively rather than individually). All these changes were adopted as they aided the group dynamic, were communicative in nature, and it was felt that to a large extent they would make the students more accountable for their own learning.

Some of the changes that were not implemented included those that were too time-consuming (weekly presentations), too at odds with the ideals of the program (being allowed to speak Japanese for the first ten minutes of class) and too extreme (being assessed via interview rather than an essay).

Student Feedback

On the whole student feedback was positive, with many students saying that it was the first time they had ever had so much control over their classes and (later on during the course) that it was nice to see activities or ideas they had suggested being taught during the semester. Typical comments were, "*It was fun making the syllabus with my section. I can look forward to the lessons more."* and "*It was good to discuss what we are learning. I feel more ready for the semester*." During the poster presentation session when one student in a pair showed signs of tiredness, her partner was overheard to say in encouragement, "*Wake up. This was our suggestion*!"

Discussion

Based on the results it would appear that both teacher and students benefitted from this admittedly ad-hoc and impulsive attempt at a negotiated syllabus, though the very ad-hoc nature of the implementation makes it difficult to draw conclusions as to its efficacy.

However, to those interested in employing some type of negotiated syllabus in their classroom, several issues arose that would need addressing in order for it to be measurably successful. The first issue is time; namely that more of it be spent on introducing and explaining the activity to students. When implementing a negotiated syllabus, students need time to fully understand and absorb what they are being asked to do, as well as to realize that they really *are* being asked to do it. Whether it was due to the fact that the opinions of students in Japan regarding their learning are rarely solicited, or whether the negotiation was done too early in the semester (before the students felt comfortable challenging their instructor) it was clear from the abundance of conservative changes suggested that many of the students had held back with their views. Furlong and Cartmell (2009) question (quite rightly) whether students have the skills required to engage in syllabus design. It is therefore recommended that at least two lessons be devoted to the activity in order to familiarise students with the concept, the teacher and the increased level of autonomy. Also, examples of

a syllabus both before and after negotiation could be given to students in order to show them how the activity might proceed.

The second issue that merits discussion is that some students reported that they would have liked to have been asked for their input again as the semester developed. As well, one or two students said that they felt it was unfair that their suggestions had not been adopted. It would appear that input, when 'ignored', could result in learners feeling distanced or cut off from the process. To avoid this 'distancing' it is recommended that a negotiated syllabus be introduced in stages and revisited at several points during the semester to enable students to make suggestions as they become more used to the course and the teacher. Also, care should be taken to explain to students that the fact that many suggestions are not implemented is not based on their lack of merit but rather on some other external proscribing factor. Referring again to Figure 1, perhaps the instructor might start at rung three of the ladder at the beginning of the semester and move up as the semester develops. In effect, the instructor will be building aspects of negotiation into key stages of the syllabus as and when they see fit. This could be done as little or as often as the instructor felt the syllabus required. Not only would this give the instructor (and the syllabus) more flexibility but it would likely maintain motivation levels throughout the semester.

The final issue that arose is that a negotiated syllabus imposes an added burden on the teacher. Trying to incorporate student needs into the syllabus requires a significant amount of careful planning. The amount of planning has a direct relationship to the amount of negotiation given to students – so any instructor thinking of giving students a great deal of control in the decision-making process should bear this in mind. However, Storch (2002) states that when learners collaborate together it leads to an improvement in their learning experience so the additional planning is more than made up for by the increase in student engagement.

Conclusion

One of the core features of the ELA program is that it promotes a learner centred environment, which is one of the main requirements for a negotiated syllabus (Nunan, 1998). This author believes that allowing the students to participate in the design and direction of the syllabus made them more motivated and committed to the course as well as giving them a greater idea of what was required of them to be successful and how they might best achieve this success. While it is acknowledged that a fully negotiated syllabus would be extremely difficult for teachers to implement it is proposed that teachers (if not already doing so) do more to increase student input and encourage them to take a more active role in their learning. Syllabi are, on the face of it, designed to engage students; it is time that students become more engaged in syllabus design.

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