

Exploring the Use of a Negotiated Syllabus in Intensive Courses

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This article examines the implementation of a negotiated syllabus in a 5-day, 30-hour intensive course designed for 16-17-year-old Japanese English learners (C1/C2) preparing to study abroad in the UK. It discusses relevance, engagement, course fit, adaptability, potential drawbacks, reflections on learner feedback over multiple years and what defines a negotiated syllabus.

Keywords: course design, negotiated syllabus, engagement, motivation

In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the concept of a negotiated syllabus has gained traction as an effective approach to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Unlike traditional syllabi, where the content and methodology are predetermined by instructors or institutions, a negotiated syllabus involves students in the decision-making process, tailoring the course content to their specific needs and interests. This approach aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, emphasizing the importance of relevance and learner autonomy in fostering motivation and investment in the course.

This article explores the implementation and impact of a negotiated syllabus in a high-level EFL program designed for young learners preparing to study abroad in the UK. By allowing students to select topics directly related to their future experiences, such as academic writing, cultural integration, and effective communication, the negotiated syllabus not

only heightened their interest but also made the learning process more meaningful. The use of authentic materials and real-life scenarios further bridged the gap between the classroom and the real world, enhancing the relevance of the course content.

A key advantage of a negotiated syllabus is its adaptability, allowing for continuous adjustments based on student feedback and changing needs. This flexibility is particularly beneficial in a short-term intensive course, enabling real-time modifications to content and activities, such as incorporating additional sessions on conversational English and situational role-plays. However, maintaining a balance between accommodating student preferences and meeting essential learning objectives required careful planning and a dynamic approach to course management.

Feedback collected from students via end of course surveys and discussion sessions over multiple years consistently highlighted the positive impact of this adaptable approach on their engagement and confidence in their language abilities. Students appreciated having a say in the course content, making the learning experience more relevant and enjoyable. However, the implementation of a negotiated syllabus also posed challenges, particularly in terms of pre-course preparation and the need for flexibility and adaptability on the part of the instructor. This article delves into these challenges and offers insights into how they can be addressed to

ensure the success of a negotiated syllabus in EFL education.

Relevance and Engagement

A negotiated syllabus can enhance student engagement by making the learning experience more relevant to the learner's needs. This aligns with the principles of student-centered learning, which emphasize involving learners in the decision-making process to increase their motivation and investment in the course (Nunan, 1999). Unlike traditional syllabi, where methodology and content are chosen by the instructor or institution, the negotiated syllabus on the intensive course allowed students to select topics directly related to their upcoming experiences in the UK. This not only heightened their interest but also made the learning process more meaningful. For instance, students focused on practical skills such as understanding cultural nuances and managing academic expectations in a UK setting. They also discussed socio-cultural issues like racism, crime, and cultural differences. According to Breen and Littlejohn (2000), when students see the direct use of what they are learning, their engagement levels increase significantly.

Additionally, a negotiated syllabus incorporates authentic materials and real-life scenarios, further enhancing the relevance of the course content. Authentic materials, such as restaurant menus, local maps, guidebooks, public transport maps, and school guidelines, provide students with a realistic context for their language use. Brown (2012) argues that the use of authentic materials in language teaching can bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world, thereby increasing student engagement. Based on classroom

observations and feedback, this approach has clear merit.

Survey and discussion group feedback over multiple years consistently highlighted the positive impact of a negotiated syllabus on their engagement. Many students reported feeling more motivated and confident in their language abilities, attributing this to the relevance of the course content to their future experiences, such as handling British money or discussing differences between Japanese and UK boarding school policies.

However, as students chose the subsequent topics and points of focus for the following day's session, pre-course preparation was not possible, and I had to prepare materials the night before. Teachers adopting this approach need adequate time in their schedule and access to a wide variety of resources. Conducting a pre-course survey to gather data from students on course content would aid in preparation and allow for more detailed negotiation with institutional stakeholders. Unlike a non-negotiated syllabus, negotiation with the institution is also necessary to ensure quality learning outcomes and alignment with institutional needs.

Course Fit

Aligning the syllabus with learners' goals is crucial for the success of any educational program, especially for high-level English learners preparing to study abroad. The negotiated syllabus was designed to meet the advanced proficiency levels of the students, ensuring that the course content was both challenging and relevant, fostering a productive learning environment (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

A key advantage of a negotiated syllabus is its ability to tailor the course content to the specific needs and interests of the learners. In this course, students selected topics directly related to their future experiences in the UK, such as academic writing, cultural integration, and effective communication in educational and social settings. with both teachers and peers. This customization made the course more relevant and helped to address the specific linguistic and cultural challenges that the students were likely to encounter (Graves, 2000).

Topics like debating and active listening were chosen for their academic benefits. These topics were chosen by the institution but had been adapted in their presentation and teaching approach based on feedback from previous years. This feedback indicated that the learners, while finding the topics useful, thought they would be better suited to a different course.

A point to remember is that while topics chosen by the students are more likely to be engaging, the learners are not always able to identify areas in which they need to improve or be challenged. The teacher may have to include other materials that will benefit the students linguistically, follow course guidelines or meet certain institutional expectations. In the design and review of this course, I had to propose changes and get approval before the following course could begin. A negotiated syllabus, while very engaging, poses problems in itself as the teacher will have to justify choices made or content included. That said, learners commented over the duration of the course that they felt nervous about living abroad for a range of reasons, but all agreed that the tailored nature of the

course gave them more confidence and a heightened sense of scope when it came to what their lives would be like upon leaving Japan.

The negotiated syllabus incorporated a variety of learning activities and materials catering to different learning styles, such as role-plays, group discussions, and project-based learning activities simulating real-life scenarios in the UK. This variety ensured the course remained dynamic and engaging (Brown, 2012).

Balancing the need for structure with flexibility required careful planning, I had to adapt the course content based on ongoing feedback from students and justify the course design to the institution (Nunan, 1999).

I referred to a set of documents which outlined the course learning outcomes, proposed methodology and any core content decided by the institution and/or myself. This design and course overview was achieved by breaking each session into blocks with each focusing on one of the following: English language ability improvement (ELA), debate skills (DS) and foreign culture and living abroad (FCLA). This block style was accepted by the institution as it allowed for their proposed content (debate and active listening skills) to be included but also allowed for the learners to choose how much time was spent on each block each day based on their needs. The ELA block is broken down into subsections that focus on four key areas. The first, Negotiation of Meaning, focused on communicating meaning when the learner does not know the English, using synonyms, descriptions, or sequences (e.g., cooking or describing the use of an item). This section included several communicative, student-centered activities that were introduced, practiced, and revisited

throughout the course. The second area, Listening Strategies, addressed the different types of listening students will encounter academically and socially while abroad, along with techniques and coping mechanisms for success. This section also incorporated a study abroad element, exploring a range of accents, school study settings, social listening scenarios, and reviewed the study skills laid out in the in-house materials that were incorporated at the request of the institution. The third area, Writing Emails, focused on writing formal and semi-formal emails and messages to teachers and fellow students. It included tasks for drafting emails for various purposes, practicing a range of functions and levels of formality. The final area, Discourse Skills, built on the debate skills (DS) block emphasizing conversations and topics learners will encounter abroad. This section covered forming rebuttals, interjecting, joining conversations, expressing opinions, and disagreeing non-confrontationally. Debate skills (DS) focused on the more academic side of communication which through a range of learner chosen debate topics was linked into the FCLA and ELA blocks. This block served as a bridge between the student chosen content and the institutional requirements of the course. By linking the content, it made the different elements of the course blend together in a more logical way as opposed to having “bolt on” sections of the course to meet requirements. When designing a course of this kind, teachers need to be aware of the constraints they may face and find ways of linking content effectively, in addition to filling the contractual needs of the agreement made between the institution, course provider (myself) and the learners.

Regarding the foreign culture and living abroad aspects, learners chose topics for discussion, such as socially acceptable topics, slang, religion, and politics. I designed input sessions around these topics, including micro lectures, discussions, open Q&A sessions, and student-centered research tasks.

The course booklet contained staple topics to address over the course. These staples were chosen by myself and negotiated with the institution to provide a base content for the course. Learners generated a list of proposed content points at the course’s inception, which were addressed in subsequent sessions.

This gave little time to prepare materials but over time, a bank of materials organized by theme have accumulated.

Despite the challenges of the course for both learners and myself, the overall fit of a negotiated syllabus with the course goals and the learners’ needs was a significant factor in the success of the program. However, the course cannot be easily standardized, which could pose difficulties if multiple courses were run simultaneously, as different groups might receive varying content and outcomes.

Adaptability

The flexibility of a negotiated syllabus allows for continuous adjustments based on student feedback and changing needs, which is particularly beneficial in a short-term intensive course (Graves, 2000). This adaptability enabled real-time modifications to content and activities, such as incorporating additional sessions on conversational English and situational role-plays when students expressed a need

for more practical communication skills (Nunan, 1999).

However, maintaining a balance between accommodating student preferences and meeting essential learning objectives required careful planning and a dynamic approach to course management (Nation & Macalister, 2010). This process involved quickly assessing the effectiveness of activities and making necessary adjustments without disrupting the course flow. Over time, I became adept at this assessment through reflection and seeking advice from other teachers. Formal reports on each learner included concrete assessment criteria and a 300-word commentary on their performance, participation, and specific areas of success or struggle.

The negotiated syllabus also allowed for the integration of diverse teaching materials and methods, such as UK university brochures, public transport maps, and guidebooks, creating a more immersive learning environment (Brown, 2012). This variety catered to different learning styles and enhanced overall engagement and motivation. Gathering such materials took substantial time, which teachers should consider when designing a course of this nature.

Student feedback highlighted the positive impact of this adaptable approach, with many appreciating the ability to influence course content and feeling their individual learning needs were better addressed. However, some learners preferred more time on specific areas like listening or writing skills. This led to discussions on conducting pre-course and post-course surveys to gather feedback on missing points of interest or importance.

Reflection on Learner Feedback

Gathering and reflecting on learner feedback is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of a negotiated syllabus. Feedback collected through surveys at the end of each course iteration over multiple years provided valuable insights into students' experiences and perceptions. This feedback informed the content and construction of future courses.

Positive feedback consistently highlighted increased engagement and motivation. Students appreciated having a say in the course content, making the learning experience more relevant and enjoyable. According to Breen and Littlejohn (2000), involving students in syllabus design can lead to higher motivation and a greater sense of ownership over their learning. Students expressed that the topics they chose were directly applicable to their future studies and daily life in the UK.

However, some challenges were revealed. Some students requested more input on topics specific to individual needs rather than the group, making it challenging to incorporate all requests. This aligns with Graves' (2000) observation that while flexibility is a strength of the negotiated syllabus, it requires careful management to ensure all learning objectives are met. Future iterations could incorporate a more balanced approach, combining student input with a structured framework to provide clearer direction, allowing for better preparation and catering to institutional needs.

Feedback indicated that the use of authentic materials and real-life scenarios was particularly beneficial. Students felt these elements helped bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world

application, enhancing their preparedness for studying abroad. This supports Brown's (2012) argument that authentic materials can significantly increase the relevance and effectiveness of language instruction.

Overall, reflections on learner feedback underscore the importance of balancing flexibility with structure in a negotiated syllabus. By continuously adapting the course based on student feedback, I can create a more engaging and effective learning experience while being wary of overloading sessions or sacrificing quality and sound design to satisfy every request.

Conclusion

This reflection provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of a negotiated syllabus and its impact on learner engagement and achievement. It highlights the importance of incorporating student feedback, needs, and interests in both pre- and post-course design stages. Structured guidance during interactive activities is crucial, balancing engagement with clear instructional support (Jones, 2022). This ensures learners participate actively and achieve intended objectives.

The student-centered nature of the course allowed for constructive feedback, motivating learners and facilitating academic growth. As Brown (2021) notes, prompt and detailed feedback significantly influences learners' ability to improve and succeed. Educators should prioritize high-quality feedback when implementing a negotiated syllabus.

By following these recommendations, teachers can create inclusive and effective learning environments that support diverse student needs, leading to improved educational outcomes and a positive learning experience. However, designing such a course requires meeting institutional needs, overall course goals, and adequate preparation time. Therefore, teachers should have access to a variety of resources and support. Implementing aspects of the negotiated syllabus in established courses allows teachers to refine their skills. Through designing, researching, teaching, and reflecting on this course, my knowledge of the negotiated syllabus and catering to learner needs has significantly improved my teaching skills, applicable to various classes and teaching areas. I recommend all teachers experiment in this area at some point in their careers.

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