INONU UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION
December 2010♦Special Issue/Volume. 11, Issue. 3, pp. 33-44
Refereed Paper
ISSN: 1300–2899

Let Them Have a Say

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Abstract

Language learning and teaching necessitates at least three basic components: the teacher, the student and the syllabus. While the two components, i.e. the teacher and the student were extensively dealt with in various studies, the syllabus remains an area worth exploring to facilitate learning by the student and teaching by the teacher. This study was conducted with English Language students (who will also be referred to as participants or learners) describing their needs upon which a syllabus with authentic material content did emerge. Prior to the delivery of a course titled Contextual English Grammar Course, a semi-structured interview was administered to the students of the English Language Teaching Department of the University of Çukurova, Turkey, seeking views and expectations in terms of source, content and procedure of the course. The data obtained from interviews were analyzed observing emerging themes. In line with students' views, a negotiated type syllabus was designed putting them at the centre of the design process.

Keywords: *English language teaching, syllabus design, negotiated syllabus, learner centeredness*

English Language Teaching (ELT) is most commonly seen as an educational practice, with internal debates focusing, for example, on the method, syllabus, content, and materials of teaching. Syllabuses, as stated by Candlin (1984), are 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. However, it is widely accepted that learners use their own strategies and mental processes to sort out the system that operates in syllabus design with which they are presented (Williams & Burden, 1997). For instance, structural syllabuses have been attacked due to a lack of a true understanding of language and communicative value by proponents of functional-notional syllabuses (e.g. Wilkins, 1981). Functional- notional ideas have also been critiqued by, amongst others, Brumfit (1981) who maintains that the difficulty of defining a notion and the negotiation of social meaning within social contexts seriously undermine its claims to provide an effective syllabus for learners. In syllabuses such as situational, skill-based, task-based and content-based types, one can hardly see any reference to contribution deriving from the learner. With the emergence of the awareness of teachers' and students' beliefs about themselves, the language and its society in question, we can see some significant involvement of the individual learner in drafting language programs and preparing syllabuses. Such beliefs of teachers and students alike were dealt with in a significant number of studies conducted by Naiman et al. (1978); Tumponsky, (1991), Ellis, (1993) and Richards and Lockhart, (1997).

A major division is based on the type and content of the syllabus which frames the work teachers and students do together (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In traditional syllabuses, the content is prescribed by syllabus writers before a course begins, therefore, traditional syllabuses are predictive documents because they set out what is to be taught. These syllabuses are product-oriented, which focus on the outcomes of instruction, i.e. the knowledge and skills to be gained by the learner. However, process syllabuses focus on the skills and processes involved in learning language and the learning experiences themselves rather than on the end products of these processes. An important characteristic of the process syllabus is that it is an infrastructure rather than a learning plan, with the syllabus designer no longer pre-selecting learning content, but providing a framework for teacher and learners to create their own on-going syllabus in the classroom (Breen, 1987, p.166), thus allowing for changing abilities, learning needs, and perceptions of the learners, without specifying particular content, methodology, lexis, structure, or grammar (Breen, 1987, p.168). The process syllabus is a radically analytic syllabus. In its strong form at least, not only the content but the materials, methodology and types of assessment used in a course are not pre-determined but are negotiated between the instructor and the learners throughout the course. That is, learners help select course content and materials and provide input on how they want to be taught and assessed. Process syllabuses have, therefore, evolved "as a means of planning, implementing and evaluating negotiation in the classroom and the decisions to which teachers and students may jointly arrive" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p.2). It distinguishes itself from conventional, content syllabuses by identifying classroom decisions as potentials for negotiation whereby teacher and students together can evolve and work through the actual curriculum of the classroom group (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p.29).

Similarly, Prabhu (1992), in his conception of lessons as pedagogic and social events, notes the importance of process within contextual factors, emphasizes that lessons are experiences of growth. As with Allwright (1984), he highlights interaction between learners themselves as well as between the teacher and learners as a possible key to learning. What is interesting about these views is that they both reintroduce learners as a key participant in the learning process, and provide a theoretical basis for negotiated contributions to syllabus development made by learners.

This view of the negotiated syllabus incorporates a solid foundation for both linguistic development and social empowerment. Constructed by the group, it should resolve who does what, with whom, with what resources, when, how, and for what learning purposes (Breen, 1984; 1987). Brumfit (1984) points out that there must be a starting point for negotiation in forming negotiated syllabus. Some questions are still under research in the field such as 'is everything truly negotiable?' 'who leads the negotiations?' 'is the teacher really a peer?' 'do all learners participate in the negotiation process?', or 'is it dominated by just a few?' and 'indeed, do learners respect and want to participate in the process at all?'

Breen (1987) explicitly adopts a constructivist position to justify process-oriented syllabuses. The negotiated or a process syllabus in English language teaching is a term which means that the content of a particular course is a matter of discussion and

negotiation between teacher and students, according to the wishes and needs of learners in conjunction with the expertise, judgment and advice of the teacher. This type takes the basic principles of communicative language teaching to their logical conclusion. The negotiated model is totally different from other syllabuses in that it allows full learner participation in selection of content, mode of working, route of working, assessment, and so on. It should by this means embody the central principle that the learner's needs are of paramount importance.

Nunan (1988) examines some of the problems surrounding syllabus negotiation. His work, which provides a wide-ranging practical model of the negotiated syllabus within an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, emphasizes the negotiation of goals. He recognizes that learners might initially resist this process, and that teachers may have to train and guide learners to set their own syllabus. Whilst this seems to undermine the concept of equality for the teacher and learners, it is a necessary stage in the overall development of negotiated syllabuses. He suggests that teachers should be facilitators, and make sure that a compromise be reached between learner resistance and learner-centeredness.

As with many techniques and approaches in ELT, when taken to extremes the negotiated syllabus can arouse strong feelings. At one extreme, learners may well respond negatively to being asked on the first morning of their course ‘well, what do you want to do?` The impression that this question can give, particularly prior to a comfortable rapport established within the group, is that the teacher is unprepared and unprofessional. It is also worth remembering that many learners may have no experience whatsoever in having a say regarding content of the course. Their educational background may not have provided for such an eventuality.

At another extreme, the teacher, who deals with reams of material that may be irrelevant to the needs and preferences of learners, is soon likely to encounter similar negative reactions. The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle. By being aware of the possible reaction of some learners to the application of the negotiated syllabus and by the reaction of others to the imposition of an external syllabus, a successful teacher should generally be able to keep most of the learners happy – an essential component of any course.

Those teachers who are required for whatever reason to follow a particular course book or course program will probably find it productive to get regular feedback from their learners on what they find interesting and useful in the course book and what they find less important for their needs. Teachers who base their courses on more eclectic sources may benefit from offering their learners a list of possible areas to cover and modify when and if found necessary.

Thus, we believe that syllabus designers need to change their conceptions of both what a syllabus is and consequently, how a syllabus should be developed. In line with this, the present study has three aims: 1) to try to put learners at the centre of

syllabus design, 2) to identify what learners need and want to do in Contextual Grammar Course, and 3) to develop a model of negotiated syllabus in an EFL setting.

METHOD

Participants

The present study was carried out with 135 freshman English Language Teaching students from the University of Çukurova through convenience sampling. The participants, aged between 18-20 (111 females and 24 males), all completed a one-year prep program at the same department, and were taking the grammar course in question three hours per week (total 14) for one academic term (Spring, 2009-2010). Being one of the required courses in the curriculum, this course comprises structural points all employed in context. The participants' level of English is relatively similar in that they received the same instruction in the prep year, and were administered the same TOEFL-type department proficiency exam. Regarding test performance, no statistically significant difference was observed between students' test results.

The Design and Procedure

The outcomes presented in this exploratory qualitative study are based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The main reason for choosing a qualitative design is, as was suggested by Merriam (1998), such studies focus on understanding how people make sense of the world and the experiences they have in this process. Since the aim here was to try to figure out the perceptions, beliefs and opinions of the students, the study employed semi-structured face-to-face interviews (See Appendix-1). A semi-structured interview is a method of research used in the social sciences. It is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during interviews as a result of what the interviewee says. The interviewer, in a semi-structured interview, generally, has a framework of themes to be explored. It is often beneficial to have an interview guide prepared, which is an informal "grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). Interview guides help researchers to focus an interview on the topics at hand without constraining them to a particular format. This freedom can help interviewers to tailor their questions to the interview context/situation and to the people they are interviewing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The open-ended interview questions were pretested on a sample of three students. They were prepared and conducted in Turkish. However, the answers were translated into English for this manuscript. The interview sessions were held during the registration week. Twenty-seven students were interviewed on a day. Each interview lasted between 10 to 15 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded by using ToM (time-of-mention) of themes. Recurring themes within the data were identified and subjected to statistical analysis. A descriptive, non-parametric chi-square test was run to observe any potential difference in the dispersion of the emerged themes. Six

main items in the interviews sought responses from participants regarding: (1) topic coverage, (2) type of presentation (focus on form/meaning or both), (3) expectations from instructor concerning course delivery, (4) commitments of students to the course, (5) types of authentic texts to be covered, and (6) source of text retrieval.

During the interviews, unstructured follow up questions were used to elaborate on targeted topic or to clarify interviewees' remarks. The interviewer, who also was the researcher, was very cautious in not expressing her own ideas on the topic.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Emerging themes for the six interview items will be presented in tabular and verbatim forms, and statistical data will be discussed regarding theme of each item.

Topics Coverage

For this item, it was *rhetorics,* with 25.8 %, that was mostly expected to be dealt with in this course. *Sentential analysis* (24.2 %) and *structure* (23.7 %) were the other two major topics learners expressed wish to see covered. The excerpt below illustrates the participants' views on this matter.

I would like to study general structure of grammar and sentence analysis. I want to observe how the grammar is used effectively in speech and in our essay writing especially in writing course.

Additionally, the learners would also like to study *text analysis* (12.1 %), *phrase analysis* (6.8 %), and *word structure* (4.2 %). *Contrastive analysis* studies between Turkish and English and *error correction* are topics which have rather low percentages. Table 1 depicts the descriptive analysis of this item.

Table 1
Themes Related to Topics Coverage

Themes	f	%
Rhetorics	49	25.8
Sentential Analysis	46	24.2
Structure	45	23.7
Text Analysis	23	12.1
Phrase Analysis	13	6.8
Word Structure	8	4.2
Contrastive Analysis	4	2.1
Error Correction	2	1.1
	190	100

Most syllabi, prepared beforehand, and handed out to students are of prescriptive nature. The course instructor, in line with the institution's regulations, designs the

syllabus prior to delivery of the course, most often, some considerable time ago, not knowing exactly what students' preferences are. A syllabus, designed and followed in this fashion, may lead to lack of motivation in terms of performance in and attendance at the course. As can be seen from Table 1, such a variety of themes does indeed necessitate some consideration.

Type of Presentation

For Item 2, type of presentation, three themes were highlighted: (1) Focus on Form, (2) Focus on Meaning, and (3) Focus on both Form and Meaning. It is worth here mentioning that *meaning* (65.7 %) is favored when compared to structure. This may imply that learners do seek meaningful context in this specific course, possibly due to the course title: *Contextual Grammar*. However, even if the course title suggests what they desired most is *meaning*-focused approach, some of the learners with much lower percentages indicated that they preferred *form* based presentation (17.1%), and those who indicated preference for both *form and meaning* based input also constituted 17.1%.

Table 2
Themes Related to Type of Presentation

Themes	f	%
Meaning	69	65.7
Form	18	17.1
Both	18	17.1
	105	100

Context is extremely important for grammar instruction. Thus, we cannot think of grammar stripped of context, since grammar points would have no attributes in such a case. Aware of this, we see that learners here overwhelmingly expressed views to see grammar bearing meaning. The results received clearly indicate dominance of content over form alone.

Expectations from Instructor

For Item 3, ten themes were highlighted: (1) Teacher as Participant, (2) Encouraging Discussion, (3) Competent in Field, (4) Sparing Time for Review, (5) Tolerant, (6) Integrating Humor into Class, (7) Exemplification, (8) Using Supplementary Material, (9) Making Frequent Assessment, (10) Encouraging Research. Themes and pertaining percentages can be observed in Table 3.

Table 3
Themes Related to Expectations from Instructor

Themes	f	%
Exemplification	69	23.6
Using Supplementary Material	59	20.2
Teacher as Participant	37	12.7

Encouraging Discussion	26	8.9
Competent in Field	23	7.9
Sparing Time for Review	20	6.8
Integrating Humor into Class	19	6.5
Tolerant	18	6.2
Encouraging Research	17	5.8
Making Frequent Assessment	4	1.4
	292	100

What learners expected most from their instructors were different materials and examples to reinforce the content of the day (23.6 %). Similarly, they sought supplementary materials to understand and review the topic (20.2%). Learners, by 12.7 %, indicated that they would like to see the teacher as a participant in class. This amount of percentage is in line with Nunan's (1988) belief which emphasizes the teachers' role as a facilitator leading to a learner-centered context in an EFL setting. However, the discrepancy in percentage regarding exemplification coming from teachers and seeing teacher as a participant seems to favor a teacher-centered approach. Yet, 12.7 % should be heeded by teachers who should be prepared to incorporate students' ideas and contribution to course delivery. The teacher is expected to lead to discussion in class (8.9 %). The excerpt below illustrates participants' views regarding this item.

I need to talk and express myself in every class and also in this course. The teacher should visualize the content of the topic so that I could be engaged into the topic of the day. I need a variety of materials in the class to reinforce the topic. The text book is not enough and it may be boring so the teacher should make the class interesting. I would like to listen to CDs, watch videos and study on handouts.

The theme, *teacher as participant,* is one of the mostly favored ones, and this may be related to Breen's (1984) work in the field where social interaction between teacher and students is very important in the negotiation process of syllabus design. The whole process of teacher- learner negotiation will probably remain so throughout the course. Views expressed by learners of their instructors are very significant if taken into consideration. Sadly, most teachers prefer to go 'their own way' without any consultation regarding views of learners, who consider themselves incapacitated individuals and always ready to receive rather than give. From Table 3, we can see that contrary to most teachers' beliefs, learners expressed willingness to see the *teacher as a participant in class*, which can be interpreted as asking for more individual involvement in instructional matters.

Responsibilities of Students

As a prime responsibility, learners mostly felt responsible by *attending the class regularly* (18.0 %). Doing *homework and projects* is the second most important responsibility for them (17.8 %). *Bringing required materials* (16.8 %), preparing *for*

class (15.3 %), and *reviewing the covered topics* (14.5 %) are three important responsibilities emerging as themes in the interviews. All related themes are cited in Table 4.

Table 4
Themes Related to Students' Responsibilities

Themes	f	%
Regular attendance	72	18.0
Homework and Projects	71	17.8
Bringing required materials	67	16.8
Preparing for the class	61	15.3
Reviewing the covered topics	58	14.5
Asking questions	41	10.3
Respect for the instructor	13	3.3
Note taking	9	2.3
Establishing good relationship with classmates and instructor	8	2.0
	400	100

Allwright (1984) highlights that learners and their responsibilities are a possible key to learning. The learners in this study are introduced as a key participant in the learning process, and provided a theoretical basis for negotiated contributions to syllabus design. The excerpt below best illustrates the responsibility felt by learners:

As a student I feel responsible to prepare for the course content before the class and make daily study in order to be successful. And in class I listen to the lecture very carefully (S1). I try to attend classes regularly and respect my teacher (S2). I try to do some preparation not to be unaware of the content of the day. If I am not prepared beforehand I feel not safe during the class hour (S3).

Topics of Authentic Texts

Daily life issues, by 26.0 %, is the most preferred topic to be dealt with in this course. Other popular topics among learners are *Geography* (13.5 %) and *History* (13.3 %) ranking next in priority. *Politics* by 12.2 % is also one of the most popular themes to emerge regarding this item. The excerpt below illustrates the learners' views:

I like to read newspapers everyday so it is very convenient for me to bring a newspaper article that includes daily life matters. By doing so, I can follow the recent news in and outside the country. I am also interested in Turkish geography and history; in addition, I want to analyze and discuss about texts that is relevant to my interest in the class hours.

Table 5
Themes Related To Topics of Authentic Texts

Themes	f	%
Daily life issues	94	26.0
Geography	49	13.5
History	48	13.3
Politics	44	12.2
Arts	20	5.5
Literature	19	5.2
Culture	19	5.2
Health	18	5.0
Sports	15	4.1
Science and Technology	12	3.3
Tabloid News	6	1.7
Biography	5	1.4
Environment	5	1.4
Fashion	5	1.4
Education	3	.8
	362	100

As expected, *daily issues* emerged as the most dominant theme here. This indicates that what is current seems to attract the greatest attention. Thus, while selecting texts, it is extremely important that instructors pay due attention to topic currency. Having a look at the table, we can see a good variety of types of topics highlighted by learners. Should this variety be presented with updated information, no doubt, it would greatly be welcomed by learners.

Sources

The participants in this study preferred referring to *books* (30.9 %) as a prime source in order to retrieve texts to study on. *Journals,* by 28.7 %, and *newspapers,* by 22.2 %, emerged the other two popular sources among participants. The *Internet* was also highlighted by 13.6 % of the participants. The excerpt below stresses the popular opinion of the learners.

I do not enjoy reading texts on any textbooks because they include most of the time out of date information. What is interesting to me is to be exposed to recent and relevant articles for example teachers may use journal articles which have recent and up-to-date information for all of us.

Table 6
Themes Related to Sources

Themes	f	%
Books	100	30.9
Journals	93	28.7
Newspapers	72	22.2
Internet	44	13.6
Novels and Short Stories	9	2.8
Experiences	1	.3
Cartoons	1	.3
Videos	2	.6
Encyclopedia	2	.6
	324	100

From Table 6, unlike what one may expect, we can observe that the *Internet*, despite the fact that it probably offers the easiest and most cost-effective access, did not emerge as a main source of information retrieval. *Books*, the most conventional and yet probably most costly sources, have emerged as a prime theme. In addition, other favored themes such as *journals* and *newspapers (*probably perceived as printed material) may also have provided learners with a relatively more secure platform to rely on. From the interviews, it can well be understood that instructors should continue to enter classes with textbooks in hand, at least for the foreseeable future.

In line with the topics and pertaining themes emerged from the interviews a negotiated syllabus was designed and implemented during the course Contextual Grammar (See Appendix-2).

CONCLUSION and SUGGESTIONS

What is done in this process of syllabus preparation serves both learners' linguistic needs and the democratic requirements of the classroom. As in Nunan's (1988) study, we tried to redefine the syllabus as: "what is, not what should be". As for `what is,` regarding teacher responsibilities, the fact that 23.6 % of students would like to see the teacher *using exemplification* and 20.2% *expecting supplementary materials from the teacher* may contradict the participatory role students would attribute to the teacher. However, as still regarded an authority, such an expectation from the teacher seems to be well-founded and should by no means be interpreted as students seeing the teacher as the main and sole authority in running the course.

Based on Nunan's definition, 'what is' emerges from the learners themselves. As the teacher becomes a peer and a facilitator for learners, learners become more powerful and more autonomous within the learning context. Thus, there needs to be a change in the social genre of the lesson to encourage acceptance of a learner-centered syllabus amongst all its participants (Prabhu, 1992). In this way, learners might be allowed freedom of choice and self-expression, unavailable in most existing syllabus types. This way, they would become more powerful and more autonomous in their

learning. The learner-centered, negotiated syllabus does *not* represent the abandonment of syllabuses. Rather, by focusing on the 'receivers of education', the syllabus is embraced by the very individuals it serves. The negotiated syllabus should not replace teachers' decisions; however, it should emphasize the role of the teacher as a *facilitator* and a *guide* at any level of the course: from preplanning to practice and production. Such an approach to syllabus design could enact the process of self-discovery as well, leading to shared decision-making and responsibility.

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