

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The negotiated syllabus is one of the latest entries into the long list of approaches and methodologies pertinent to language learning. While the term is relatively new the principles and underlying concepts are not. As Breen and Littlejohn (2000) state, “It is not too grandiose a claim to suggest that the direct engagement of students in their learning through democratic decision-making has its roots in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism” (p. 11). Although the terms “democratic” and “classical liberalism” have since been diluted (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000) this thinking can still be seen in the approach to education

In the last three decades further theories have contributed to the ideas inherent in a negotiated syllabus. There is evidence from studies done in the 1970s which support Chomsky’s assertion that learning is more innate and overt instruction is not as useful for second language acquisition (cited in Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Later, Michael Long “launched a research agenda for SLA ... which sees interactive negotiation as the means for the creation and uptake of comprehensible input” (cited in Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 16). Both of these ideas encourage the stance that language is better learned through experiences and that grammar and structures would be learned incidentally.

An important element of the negotiated syllabus is that of the interactions with others. Vygotsky’s (1962) work highlighted the importance of scaffolding to learning. More specifically, he advocated interaction between someone who is not fully independent and someone with the knowledge or capabilities for the task. This difference in ability was dubbed the ZPD – or zone of proximal development (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In the same vein, Paulo Freire’s (1970) work “similarly located emancipatory education within local cultural action and proposed worthwhile learning as essentially an outcome of social collaboration” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 13).

Approaches that influenced the negotiated syllabus were Communicative Language Teaching and task-based learning (Benson, 2001). CLT supposes that students have a tendency to create their own syllabus and agenda for the class (Benson, 2001). Arguably, then, the syllabus should allow for these changes and allow students the freedom to work within their own syllabus. The task-based syllabus introduced the notion of using tasks in the classroom to foster authentic dialogue to reach a conclusion. As stated by Nunan (1988), “a basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must learn not only to make grammatically correct, propositional statements about the experiential world, but must also develop

the ability to use language to get things done” (p. 25). In this way, students are able to apply real language to real-life situations.

There can be two ways to look at the negotiated syllabus: a weak version and a strong version (Benson, 2001). The weak version is when a component of the class is negotiated. The strong version is when the object is to allow students to be involved in as many aspects as possible, such as content, procedures, and assessment. The weak version is more widely used and there are not many examples of the strong version in practice. One study that is useful and shares similarities with the current study is one conducted by Simmons and Wheeler (as cited in Benson, 2001, p. 208). Both studies aim to document the implementation process of the negotiated syllabus. The Simmons and Wheeler study also included a class with adult students of varying first languages and was qualitative. The group, however, had advanced English and consisted of professionals. Because of this, they were able to have Monday meetings and attain much of their research data from these meetings. In the following study, this was not deemed practicable. In spite of this, the study follows a class that is attempting to implement the strong version and records the extent to which this is possible.

Lastly, the negotiated syllabus is seen as a way to promote learner autonomy. Research on autonomy shifted its focus “towards issues of collaboration and negotiation” (Benson, 2001, p. 14). Most, if not all, teachers would like to encourage their students to be life-long learners. In order to do this, they must guide their students to be curious and to have questions. In addition, they must support them in their own learning endeavors and foster an environment that allows students to make mistakes and learn. A student who realizes that he must be responsible for his own learning and organize his own learning begins to take “ownership” of his learning (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). As a result of the influence a negotiated syllabus can have on learner autonomy, it is vital to identify ways this process can be implemented effectively.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study will be carried out in a small school in Northern Thailand where I have worked for 2 years as a teacher in English, music, speech, and leadership. The class is a beginner level English class with 10 students. Students come in to the class with varying levels of English ability. In addition, students also vary in degrees of formal education. Some have only finished M3, while others have finished high school and or Bible school. The students range in age from 17-23 with one 28 year old and are all from hilltribe groups from Burma and Thailand. The school is run somewhat like a boarding school where teachers and students all live and eat together. Students work on a school-run farm and perform other duties around the school in exchange for a free education. The program is three years long. The study was conducted for the duration of the second semester in the first year.

The purpose of this study is to document the process of implementing a negotiated syllabus in an adult beginner level EFL class. It also seeks to address the cultural aspect of implementing a negotiated syllabus, along with the student reactions. In addition, it documents the learning experiences of the teacher-researcher. To this end, the study seeks 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?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant and will add new insight for several reasons. First, there are few outside constraints. The class is run entirely between the teacher and students. There are no other significant stakeholders as the school is not under the Ministry of Education. Also, administration is minimal and will therefore allow the teacher to choose the curriculum. In addition, the students' parents are not greatly interested in how the school is run. Second, students are at a beginning level where it is presumed negotiation is more difficult. This is significant because it will pose a challenge for the students when their level of English is minimal. It will also affect how the syllabus is designed and will therefore provide an extra layer to the study and, hopefully, new ideas. Third, the study is done in Thailand where there may not be a tendency for students to take as much ownership of their learning as students in Western cultures but instead learn by rote memorization (Liu, 1993). The study will seek to discover

some of the challenges and rewards for the students with this new approach. Fourth, the class is held entirely in English, since it has mixed-L1 students. Last, the study could provide a blueprint for teachers who want to implement a negotiated curriculum by sharing what did and didn't work in addition to students' perspectives.

#### 1.4 Limitations of the Investigation

This study represents a unique situation in which the students and teacher all live together at a small language school, and there are only ten students being observed. Therefore these conditions may be difficult to replicate. In addition, the limited number of students makes it impossible to generalize the results to a greater population. Moreover, the teacher has free reign over the curriculum, which is uncommon. Student needs and levels vary greatly with each incoming class. This combined with the small number of students makes it difficult to have a set curriculum that is followed on a yearly basis. Teachers often find themselves "reinventing the wheel", which makes the flexibility of a negotiated syllabus not only ideal but perhaps the only good choice. Lastly, the teacher is in close contact with the students on a daily basis and is emotionally connected to their well being at all times. This creates potential for bias. Despite these limitations these conditions allow for a very in depth study, and it is hoped the study will provide more questions for further research.

#### 1.5 Definition of Terms

Negotiated syllabus (also referred to as a Process syllabus) – For the purposes of this study, a negotiated syllabus and a process syllabus refer to the syllabus that is negotiated between the teacher and students in order to come to a higher level of language acquisition. It refers to negotiation at the class level.

Negotiated curriculum – A negotiated curriculum refers to the overall approach or to the curriculum of a school.

Mixed-L1 – Students who have different first languages ie. Burmese and Thai, Kachin and Lahu

#### 1.6 Summary and Organization of the Thesis

The first chapter showed that the underlying principles of the negotiated syllabus are not entirely new. The idea of democratic decision-making goes back to the enlightenment. Studies (such as those Chomsky based his research on) over the past several decades have made strides in uncovering how people best learn, and have found that people learn better through what they experience than what they are merely told. In addition, people learn better when they work with others, particularly if they are able to contribute knowledge where the other person lacks. Prior to the negotiated syllabus Communicative Language teaching and task-based learning tried to encourage the interaction and stimulation necessary to allow students to benefit from these principles and research. The negotiated syllabus is a relatively newer term. The

purpose of the negotiated syllabus is to provide a framework to enable teachers to negotiate with their students and to truly start to give over the traditional teacher's roles to the students. This study sets out to provide another piece to the puzzle by researching how a negotiated syllabus was implemented in a school in Asia, with beginner level students.

Chapter two will provide the theoretical and empirical literature and research that underpin the design of the study. Chapter three will give a thorough understanding of the research methodology for the current study, allowing the reader to fully understand what happened in the class as the negotiated syllabus was implemented. In chapter four the results of the study will be explained. In chapter five I will outline how these findings do or do not corroborate the current literature and theory, how it compares to other studies of the negotiated syllabus, and how these results can be extrapolated to other contexts.

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