

## Teaching Fish to Fly: Implementing a Modified Negotiated Syllabus with Japanese University Students in an Intermediate Listening Class

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### About the Title

In the traditionally-oriented, top-down, teacher-centered classrooms of Japan, introducing a negotiated syllabus is a rarity, and a bit of a risk. Thus, the title, “Teaching Fish to Fly,” emphasizes the novelty of, and challenge in, doing so. For, such a method can be truly as foreign of a concept as flight is to fish. In addition, the metaphor of flight, i.e. freedom and soaring, speaks well to one of the primary goals of a negotiated syllabus—enhancing learner autonomy.

### Definitions of a Negotiated Syllabus

*The Longman Dictionary of Teaching & Applied Linguistics* defines a “negotiated syllabus” as:

an approach to the development of a language course in which students’ needs and learning proficiencies are taken into account during the course; these needs are discussed by the students and teachers together during the course and serve to generate ideas about the content of the course. The negotiated syllabus reflects a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Bowen (1999) defines “negotiated syllabus” as:

a term which means that the content of a particular course is a matter of discussion and negotiation between teacher and student(s), according to the wishes and needs of the learner(s) in conjunction with the expertise, judgment and advice of the teacher.

#### Definition of “Modified” (by the author)

With a traditional negotiated syllabus, as defined above, all aspects of the content and implementation of a course, including assessment, can be negotiated. However, as the definition also calls for the “judgment and advice of the teacher,” and the concept was foreign and new to the students, the amount and extent of the negotiation was limited by the instructor to the format or style of the classes that would be used in this case.

#### Background

In some ways, the origin of the negotiated syllabus can be traced as far back as the Enlightenment, for as Çalışkan (2005), among others, points out, “learning through democratic decision-making has its roots in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism.” In the 20th century British and American educators looked toward more socially democratic ways to develop curriculum and produce a democratically-oriented citizenry. ELT instruction began to adopt the CLT model from the late 60s, which puts emphasis on communicative functions, negotiation of meaning, learner-centered activities and communicative competence (among other things), and this led directly to the next logical step—learners participating in decisions on course content. A natural outcome, then, was the development of the “process syllabus” or “negotiated syllabus.” As Hunt notes (2009), it only seems logical to have students participate in the decision making process for the why, what, how, and how well of language learning, if knowledge of such is shown to enhance motivation and efficacy, and if the goal

is language acquisition and competency.

Of course, not everyone agrees on the benefits or efficacy of a negotiated syllabus. There has been much debate. Negotiated syllabi have been called “radical” and “extreme” by Clarke (1991), and others, and he went on to say that they are “for all practical purposes unworkable in any other circumstances than with a very small group or in a one to one situation.”

However, at very least, it seems to this instructor, and the many others that have successfully implemented negotiated syllabi, that a compromise position, as later espoused by Clarke himself, seems to be quite safe and rational:

...rather than rejecting negotiation entirely, a negotiated element might be built into each component of a syllabus. In this way, learners might be allowed a degree of choice and self-expression, unavailable in most existing syllabus types.

And this is precisely what was done in the case of this listening class. Students were given control over determining the type of class they would participate in.

### Rationale

With due consideration given to the debates over negotiated syllabi as presented above, the instructor set out to expose the students to one in the hopes of enhancing and activating more learner autonomy. By exposing the students to this different approach to syllabus design, it was hoped that doing so would serve as a building block towards creating a more learner-centered/learner-responsible type of student. This was primarily done because students seem to be of the impression that by just attending classes they are going to master the language.

As is well known, that is not the case.

However, it was a big risk to take, because, as Bowen and others have pointed out:

...learners may well respond extremely negatively to being asked on the first morning of their course "Well, what do you want to do?" The impression that question can give, ..., is that the teacher is unprepared and unprofessional.

This is especially true in a situation, as exists in Japan, where learners are not used to being asked for input on their education. However, in the case at hand, the impression that the instructor was unprepared or unprofessional should have been dispelled by the knowledge and preparation demonstrated in conducting and explaining the three sample classes presented as alternative formats for the students to choose from (see section titled The Negotiation).

Thus, the benefit of introducing learner autonomy to the students, and the opportunity to create a change in attitude towards such "novel" ideas, were deemed worth the risks by the instructor, and deemed to far outweigh such risks.

### Setting

The course in which the modified negotiated syllabus was implemented was a freshman intermediate-level listening class in an English department. There were 40 students with TOEIC scores ranging from 400-480. The classroom was a typical LL-style room with a headset and computer/monitor AV system for each student. A typical LT software program is available for use by instructors, as well as Internet access being provided. In addition, instructors may use their own

choice of materials from the myriad available on the market. The course is one of four major skill-oriented classes in the curriculum (listening, writing, reading and oral communication), and is held, as is common in Japan, once a week for 90 minutes. A general course description and sample syllabus are provided by the department, but instructors are basically free to do as they wish.

### Introduction of the Concept

On the first day of class an explanation and translation of the definition of a negotiated syllabus (from Kenkyusha's Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, see Appendix 1), and its perceived benefits, were given to the students. Students were later asked to discuss and summarize the information, and express opinions about what they thought of it, to ensure that correct understanding of the concept was achieved.

In addition, various theories and concepts about what "listening" is, and about what studies of listening skills and comprehension say, were briefly discussed. For example, listening was defined and explained as not solely simple comprehension of aural text, but more as a give and take process that requires context and interaction. Also, information on short- and long-term memory and the phonological loop, and their effects on listening comprehension, was provided. This was done to give students a firmer basis on which to make their decision concerning the type of class they wanted, since most seem to believe that listening skill merely equals selection of correct answers to test-oriented comprehension questions. Again, students were asked to discuss and summarize the information to ensure that correct understanding was achieved.

### The Negotiation

As mentioned above, the actual negotiated component of the course revolved

around the style or type of class that would be conducted. This was done for the reasons mentioned above (perceived benefits of a negotiated syllabus), and to attempt to ameliorate the unbalanced skills the students have due to the deficiencies in the department's curriculum and overall language education in Japan. As is typical, the students in the class had decent proficiencies in reading and grammar, fair listening skills, but quite poor output (oral or written) skills. Though there are ostensibly other courses in which these deficiencies should be corrected, it is not always the case that this is accomplished, and so the instructor wished to provide further opportunity to do so by altering the traditional format of the listening class, but did not want to impose such on the students, and thus turned to a modified negotiated syllabus to see if students would be interested in such a format. And thus, consequently, introducing an element of learner autonomy into the mix.

In an attempt to predict students' needs and limit the choices available to a practical and practicable level (using the above mentioned "expertise of the instructor"), three alternative formats for conducting the course were demonstrated and discussed over the next three class meetings. (A "fun" listening activity was conducted during the rest of the first class meeting to build rapport, and to more closely assess the students' listening levels.)

The first format demonstrated was a typical test-preparation style that had a listening passage and then several kinds of listening-question sections (comprehension, inference, prediction). In addition, it was explained that test-taking strategies would also be included in the classes, and an example was provided. This type of class was presented as one of the possibilities because the students are assessed and placed by the department using their TOEIC scores; TOEFL scores are used to select applicants for the school's study abroad

programs; and there is a general feeling among students (expressed on surveys done by the department) that TOEIC scores are related to job offers/hiring/promotions. It is also what many of the other and their previous instructors do.

The second format demonstrated was a television news-based listening class. It was explained that in this type of class a variety of contemporary news stories and broadcasts (with transcripts) would be used. Then, one example lesson was conducted. Pre-teaching of vocabulary was done, and then comprehension questions were asked after viewing the story. The comprehension questions were of two types—those generated by the students and those generated by the instructor. A point system and various types of competitions were used for assessment and to stimulate motivation. Later, the transcript was used to study natural pronunciation, liaison, stress, intonation and rhythm, collocation and other phonological/linguistic aspects of the text. Students were also given information on where the broadcasts were available for further use, such as for confirmation of missed points, shadowing, and further listening practice.

The third format expanded the scope of the class to incorporate more of the four basic language skills, and focused the listening component on tasks which included meaningful exchange of information. In this format, students were assigned a topical reading to do before class (such as on healthy eating, environmental protection, the value of travel). They were asked to verify unknown vocabulary and specifically steered towards using online or electronic dictionaries that provide audio pronunciations before class. They were also instructed to create comprehension and discussion questions about the reading. In class, students were put into groups of four. Prior to starting the group activity, an audio version of the reading was played to provide examples of natural pronunciation, stress and rhythm for the students to emulate. Then,

students asked and answered their comprehension/discussion questions about the reading in turns. After this, each student was required to give a short talk (the length of which increased over the semester) on an assigned topic related to the reading (for example “my daily diet” when the reading was about healthy eating), and then conduct a short discussion session on that topic. (For the rest of this article, this particular type of class will be referred to as the Reading/Listening/Question & Answer/Presentation/Discussion format, or R/L/Q&A/P/D.)

In addition to the three demonstrated styles of lessons, the various strengths and benefits of each type were discussed with the students. (As well, several surveys were taken throughout the course of the semester to see if a majority of the students continued to support the chosen content/format.)

### The Students' Choice

After presenting and demonstrating the three class formats to the students, the students were asked to discuss in groups the different choices and various benefits of each type. This was done to ensure that everyone had full understanding of the information presented (as it was presented in English for the most part), and the choices being offered, and so that students could hear the opinions and ideas of their peers. Then, students were asked to privately rank the three class formats in terms of their individual preferences. They were also asked to anonymously explain in writing in Japanese their rankings (again to assess their understanding of the choices at hand).

The results for the first-place ranking of the three formats are as follows, and the R/L/Q&A/P/D-style was used throughout the first semester of the class.

TOEIC-style class: 6 students

TV News-style class: 2 students

R/L/Q&A/P/D-style class: 32 students

Second place rankings were more varied, though TOEIC was preferred most. It is believed that the “authentic” TV news format was perceived as a bit too advanced for the majority of students, or seemed like more work to them. (However, the R/L/Q&A/P/D format is actually more work for students.)

In addition, to assuage any disappointment felt by students that chose the other two types of classes, students were given information and loaned materials (upon request) for the TOEIC-style and TV news-style classes for self-study, and offered additional assistance by the instructor. Several students did so.

### Students’ Reactions and Evaluations

As was mentioned, students were asked at intervals in the term as to whether they wished to continue the chosen class format, and the response of the majority was affirmative each time. In fact, the number of students wishing to continue was larger than the original number who voted to use this class style. The students who had chosen the other formats and did do self-study under the instructor’s guidance in addition to the regular class work, also expressed their satisfaction (in person) with the R/L/Q&A/P/D format.

In addition, at the end of the course, a class evaluation consisting of five questions was conducted. These questions were:

- 1) We used a negotiated syllabus to decide the format we would use for this class. How do you feel about allowing students to decide on the type of class they will have?

- 2) Are you satisfied with this class? Why/Why not?
- 3) Do you think your listening skill has improved?
- 4) What do you like and dislike about this class?
- 5) What do you want to do next semester in this class?

As the main purpose of implementing a negotiated syllabus was to expose students to learner autonomy, to explore whether students were open to such an idea, and to see whether or not they felt using such was beneficial to them, the replies to questions 1, 2 and 5 are most pertinent here, and are addressed in more detail below, with samples provided.

As to questions 3 and 4, the results for these varied the most. For 3, the students could only self-evaluate (the next official standardized test was conducted after the survey was taken, and it is debatable whether such tests actually evaluate improvement over such a short period accurately, in this author's opinion). Self-evaluation is an important aspect of language learning (Gardner 1999, as well as many others). However, as with the concepts of learner autonomy and a negotiated syllabus, having the ability and freedom to do such self-assessment may not have been a strongly held assumption by these students, as seems to be exemplified by the number of "I'm not sure/I don't know" responses. In a test-driven language learning environment, it seems that such replies stem from an "I have no capacity, criteria," or even "no right," to determine such. Therefore such responses to 3 must be taken with a grain of salt.

For question 4, the replies centered on typical "complaints," such as the amount

of work assigned being a burden, and equally typical, and rather uninformative, positive comments such as “tanoshikatta” (I enjoyed it) or “I enjoyed talking with my friends.”

Concerning the more pertinent responses for the purposes of this discussion, for question 1, the majority of students had a positive reaction to being included in the selection of the type of class they were to do, i.e. to the use of a (modified) negotiated syllabus. Common replies revolved around the perceived benefit of being allowed input on the class format, such as in “it suited the students’ needs,” or “particular areas of weakness or strength could be addressed,” or “the enjoyment level was enhanced by being allowed to participate in the selection of the class type.” Here are some actual examples (all translations provided by a TA):

最初に話し合って決めたのは良いアイデアだと思いました。おかげで自分たちがやりたいと思える授業が受けられました。(I thought that it was a good idea to discuss how to do the class at first. Therefore, I was able to take the class which we think we want to take.)

最初にどんな授業にするのかクラスに決めさせてもらうのは、とても良かったと思います。自分たちで選んだ形式だから、自分たちに合ったスタイルで勉強できたと思います。(We were able to decide what kind of class we do. So I think it was a good idea. Because the class system was decided by us, we were able to study by the way which suits us.)

学生が授業のやり方について教師と決めるのは良いことです。自分たちに合った学習法を選ぶことができるから効率的だと思います。

(It is a good thing that we can choose the way we learn with the teacher. I think it is a sufficient way because we can choose the way which suits us.)

みんなで決めると、それぞれの苦手なことも上達できそうで良いと思います。(I think we can improve each one's weak points if we choose the class system by ourselves.)

みんなにアンケートを取って授業内容を決めるのは、みんなの意見や希望が主張できるので良いと思います。(The system of deciding the class system by questionnaire is good because we can express our opinions and hopes.)

最初にいろいろなタイプの授業を体験して、自分たちの好きなスタイルを選べたので良かった。(It was good that we were able to try several class types, and choose the favorite style.)

学生がしたいことを選んで良いと思う。(It is good because we can choose what we students want to do.)

授業をやる方式をアンケートで決めていたのは良いと思いました。(I think that deciding the class system by questionnaire is good.)

For question 2, again the majority of responses were positive, but there were a few students that expressed discontent. It is probable that they were the ones who had originally selected a different type of class to begin with, but this cannot be confirmed, as the questionnaire was anonymous. For the vast majority of students, however, positive responses, such as listed below, were the case. This

seems to indicate that not only were the students comfortable with the concept of using a negotiated syllabus but also that such a process resulted in satisfactory outcomes under the class format chosen.

この授業はリスニングを鍛えることもできるし、自分でいろいろなことについて英語で考える力を鍛えることができるのでいいと思います。(I think this class was good for listening training and also for training for thinking in English.)

この授業に満足しています。TOEIC の練習とかだけに偏ってないところがよいです。(I am satisfied with this class because we did not only do TOEIC. There was a good balance.)

満足している。自分の英語能力、特に“聞く”という部分がとても上達しているように感じるから。(I am satisfied. My English skill, especially listening part improved very much.)

And finally, for question 5, again a large majority of students expressed their desire to continue the style of class that the original majority of students had selected. However, there were some differing suggestions. These appear to be more out of a wish to try something new, reduce the workload, or try one of the other formats presented, than from actual dissatisfaction with the format used. However, this again cannot be substantiated due to the anonymous character of the survey. Examples of these positive responses, followed by those with alternative suggestions, are reproduced here:

今のような授業が良いです。とても充実していて頑張れそうです。(The current style of class is good. The class was rewarding so I feel I will continue to

do my best.)

前期と同じような授業が良い。(The same kind of class is good.)

前期と同じような感じで。(Doing class the same way is good.)

前期と同じような感じでいいと思います。(I think doing class the same way is good.)

このままで良いです。でも、もっと色々なトピックについてたくさん聞きたいです。(Doing class this way is fine. But, I would like to hear about a wider selection of topics.)

今までと同じでいいと思う。ただ、リスニングの内容が少し難しすぎると感じているので、徐々にレベルを上げるなどして欲しい。(The same kind of class as up to now is good. However, the content was a little difficult so please increase the level slowly.)

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ニュースの問題の授業がやりたいです。(I would like to do a class based on news and news questions.)

英語の歌を聞きたいです。(I would like to listen to songs.)

遊び感覚でもできるリスニングゲーム（クイズなど）。(It might be only playing, but I would like to do listening games, like a quiz show.)

映画でリスニングをして欲しいです。(I would like to use movies for listening.)

### Conclusion and Recommendations

It is difficult to arrive at any traditional conclusions concerning the outcome of this “experiment,” especially since efficacy concerning listening improvement was not readily measurable, and the actual objective, development of learner autonomy, equally difficult to determine. Such is only achievable over the long term, and with further changes to curriculum and cooperation from the faculty. And as always, there are many variables that must be considered, such as other sources of exposure to learner-centered education, or condemnation of such, in other classes or in the culture in general. One must consider how such things could affect perceived successes here. However, a very basic goal was undeniably achieved. Students were certainly exposed to a new idea, challenged by it, and even if unaware of it, they were exposed to and participated in one aspect of learner autonomy. In addition, it can be inferred from student response that this “encounter” produced positive attitudes towards such, and possibly made students more open to it, and even willing to seek out or demand such autonomy in the future. This leads the author to suggest that more instructors employ a negotiated syllabus (where and to what extent they deem it to be suitable), and that overall curriculum changes and teaching methods be adopted in order to help foster a more learner-centered, learner-autonomous, learner-responsible language teaching environment in the hopes that this will cause more language acquisition to occur than is currently taking place.

In the future, it is recommended to also allow for negotiation of the content (topics) as well as the format.

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## Appendix 1

### Negotiated syllabus (協議によるシラバス)

特定の目的のための英語教育 (English for specific purposes) において受講者の個々のニーズに応えるためにコースの冒頭はもちろん、途中でも随時彼らの要望を受け止めながら専門的な指導技術を有する教員と受講者も協議のもとで実施される語学コース、プロセス・シラバス (process syllabus) と同義に用いられることがある。