

# Creating a Course that Offers Students Choices in the Classroom

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In this article I discuss the creation, implementation and evaluation of an English syllabus that involves students making choices in the materials that they study. It was created specifically for an elective class, involving students in their first year at a women's junior college. The article forms part of a piece of action research, described by Wallace (1998) as follows:

“Action Research involves the collection and analysis of data related to some aspect of our professional practice. This is done so that we can reflect on what we have discovered and apply it to our own professional action.” (p.16)

The research also aligns with Wallace's (ibid) view that such research is “problem focused in its approach and very practical in its intended outcomes” (p.15). The problem in this study, noted in a previous article (Davies 2007), can be summarised as follows: “In large classes, where there are a range of student abilities, motivations and rates of learning, how can the classroom be organized to maximise the learning of all students?”

In a previous article (Davies 2007), I discussed the types of syllabus that could be used and the ideas of several experienced native English language teachers, who reflected on their utilisation of student choice in their courses. With regard to the article, I made a distinction between *broad choice*, where students and teacher evaluate a suggestion for the class and either accept, reject or alter it, and *controlled choice*, where a teacher creates a set of proposed activities from which the students may choose, either as a group or individually. From the results, I concluded that the use of choice in the classroom often formed part of a teacher's resources and was used to re-establish a connection with a class when pre-planned activities were stalling. While this use of choice in the classroom was clearly useful, my own interest was in creating time in the classroom where students could progress at their own pace in combination with a range of materials, selecting those that they wanted to undertake.

A further important point emerging from the results was that, where teachers had reported on controlled choice in areas such as initial topic selection for syllabuses, the key criticism of taking such an approach lay in asymmetries of knowledge: Students often did not have sufficient knowledge of the content and teacher approach to the class to make informed judgements on the choices offered to them. It was with the above issues in mind that I set out to create a course that involved student choice built into the materials.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, theories are considered as tools for working towards practical classroom solutions to the language learning and teaching problems which drive the development of applied linguistics, defined in Widdowson's (1990) sense:

"... applied linguistics is in my view an activity which seeks to identify, within the disciplines concerned with language and learning, those insights and procedures of enquiry which are relevant for the formulation of pedagogic principles and their actualisation in practice." (p.6)

In addition, Widdowson (*ibid*) argues that in order to talk about pedagogy it is necessary to relate personal experiences to more general principles, so that individual successes in teaching can be used to benefit the wider teaching community. However, he (*ibid*) notes that in relation to teaching, classes take place in particular contexts, so that the value of applied linguistics is that it offers ideas and possibilities for innovation, but it needs to be critically evaluated by teachers in light of their classroom contexts. Consequently, theory should be constantly tested against practice. In the absence of this there is the risk of over-generalisation, as noted by Kozulin (1986): Empirical discovery or innovation leads to the development of conceptual forms which are brought to bear on related problems; these conceptual forms then become abstract explanatory principles applicable to any problem within a discipline, finally breaking beyond the discipline itself to explain all fields of knowledge and finally collapsing under the weight of their claims. In applied linguistics, the constant testing and evaluation of concepts against classroom situations creates an empirical anchor for theories, while allowing teachers to use them as useful tools for developing their classroom teaching practice.

In building the materials on the basis of theoretical possibilities, one of the issues involved syllabus types: In relation to English language teaching a number of theoretical syllabuses have been developed over the years through debates concerning product and process syllabuses. In this action research many ideas have been drawn from task-based syllabuses. However, a crucial distinction has to be made between those authors who claim a distinct break from what has gone before and those who have identified a deficiency in past practice and set out to remedy it. For example, Long & Crookes (1992) propose a task-based syllabus, which they see as being very different from its predecessors. In this research I reject the Long and Crookes' model and instead treat new syllabuses as re-workings and developments of older ones; in many cases, as researchers identify weaknesses in older syllabuses they innovate with new materials, creating new activity types, with which they develop accompanying conceptual frameworks. In this sense, a task-based syllabus incorporates activities that have been utilised by previous syllabuses, but the time spent on those activities changes, with some becoming extinct as they are challenged by the new innovations. Consequently, consideration of the historical development of English language teaching does not involve a complete separation of syllabus types but a blending accompanied by debate over theory as the implications of

new activity types become clear and challenge established ideas. From this aspect, my view aligns much more closely with Kumaravivelu's (1994) principled pragmatism and Nunan's (1989) views on the learner-centred curriculum, where the latter states: "While the learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and processes to traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information from and by learners will be built into every stage of the curriculum process" (p.19). This is in contrast to Long and Crookes (1992), who identify their task-based syllabus as being radically different from past syllabuses.

### The Concept of a Task

In discussing the creation of a course it is important to define key concepts. While in everyday teaching practice practitioners may use terms such as 'task' and 'activity' interchangeably, in this research they need to be carefully defined. In the literature there is also no unified definition of 'a task'. For instance Nunan (1989) makes a clear distinction between a communicative task which he defines as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting with the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" with an 'activity' which he defines as a sub-component of a task:

"The definition of a language learning task requires specification of four components: the goals, the input (linguistic or otherwise), the activities derived from this input, and finally the roles implied for teacher and learner." (p.47)

In Nunan's framework, activities "specify what learners will do with the input which forms the point of departure with the learning task" (p.59). This contrasts with Ellis's (1998) description of a task, which involves the following components: input, procedures, language activity, outcome. Here, language activity relates to the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Long and Crookes (1992) consider 'target tasks' which are real-world, such as 'buying a train ticket, renting an apartment, etc.' and pedagogic tasks that are derived from task-types based on these target tasks. In the context of their discussion on grammar and task-based methodology Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1993) state the following: "For something to be a 'task in our discussion, the immediate criterion of success in the task must be outside of grammar" (p.124).

One key point to note is that in discussion of the concept of 'communicative task' the term rapidly shortens to 'task'. This is further strengthened by the use of the term 'task-based syllabuses'. The issue becomes particularly important in relation to grammar. As noted above, the position I take in this article is that more recent syllabus types have incorporated a great deal from past syllabus types. Not all parts of a class are necessarily 'communicative' in the sense of interaction between two or more speakers, nor are they necessarily all primarily focused on meaning. Nunan (1989) notes that "...it now seems to be widely accepted that there is value in classroom tasks which require learners to focus on form" (p.13). However, there has traditionally been a strong distinction made between meaning and form, especially

with the movement away from more structurally based approaches to teaching such as audio-lingualism. Under Nunan's (ibid) definitions a communicative task is something that involves a focus on meaning. Where 'task' and 'communicative task' are used interchangeably, a grammar exercise that is used primarily to focus on form rather than meaning lies outside the categorization and risks falling outside the discourse of analysis. While what is sometimes called 'the weak form' of CLT accommodates a focus on grammar, it (grammar) cannot be placed within the framework of task categorization.

In comparison to a tight analysis of the term 'task' such as Nunan's (1989), classroom teachers tend to use terms such as 'task' and 'activity' almost interchangeably in practical and understandable contexts. Such general terms are the starting points for discussion of how a class is planned or taught, so that both 'task' and 'activity' tend to refer to a set of interlinked but autonomous stages in a class, identifiable as having a beginning and an end, and including instruction, materials, and practice. Under this definition it therefore makes sense to talk of a 'task-chain' as a set of linked stages, which are autonomous in the sense that the tasks can be reordered or a particular task can be removed from the chain. Such reordering or removal will have effects, but the lesson will remain cohesive. This differs from a case where a task is ended in the middle, leaving students and teacher with a feeling that it is unfinished. This above conception of 'task' is not inconsistent with Nunan's (1989) description of communicative tasks involving six components, so that 'communicative tasks' form a subset of the class of 'tasks'. For the purposes of this article, I shall use the term 'task' rather than 'activity' to avoid confusion. Tasks can be either 'communicative' or 'non-communicative'. In terms of task-based syllabuses these incorporate both communicative and non-communicative tasks, but the emphasis is primarily rather than exclusively on meaning.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study took place at a women's junior college over the course of a 15-week semester. The college department in question ran a *General English* course and a *Business English* course that were mandatory for all students in the department. In conjunction with these, there was also *English Conversation*, which was an elective. *English Conversation* tended to focus more narrowly on speaking and listening activities and tended to fall within the broad tenets of the communicative approach, aligning with ideas from Nunan (1989).

## METHOD

This study involved the creation of a set of materials designed to offer students choices, and an evaluation of students' responses to an implemented course involving those materials. The design of the new materials of the course was developed from materials that had been taught over previous years in conjunction with the issues emerging from interviews and background reading relating to the action research question.

Course evaluation comes from two different sources: a questionnaire given to the students, and my own reflection on what was achieved. The course was taught to three classes of

first-year students, and the questionnaire was administered to two of those classes, one of 14 students (class 1), the other a group of 25 (class 2). It contained questions that involved both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for the use of some descriptive statistics. In terms of the total number of questionnaires returned, 29 students chose to return them. In relation to motivation to study English, students answered using a five-point Likert scale. Regarding their desire to continue or not continue the course, a 3-point scale was used (continue, indifferent, not continue). Students were asked to comment on their feelings and ideas concerning classes which were completely teacher-led and classes which were partially teacher-led while also involving devolved classroom time. These qualitative data were interpreted and allocated to key categories. As the aim of the course was to offer opportunities for individual students rather than making decisions for the group as a whole, seven students were selected on the basis of the richness of their answers and their levels of motivation. For each of these students, their comments on the devolved classroom time were summarised.

### Creating the Course

The official pre-course syllabus was written in only the most general terms, and could be adapted to a large number of variations. In past years I had taught the course using a textbook, *English Firsthand 1*, whose units had involved the following tasks: listening (which involved some vocabulary development), conversation (scripted dialogues), pair-work information exchanges, grammar and vocabulary, small group, and individual work.

The new materials were written each week prior to the classes, so that they developed as the course progressed. The core units of material were organised around commonly-used themes from the previous course, finally emerging as: (1) Talking about Family, (2) Skills and Abilities, (3) Daily Routine, (4) Location, (5) Directions (6) Shopping and Clothes, (7) Food and Restaurants, (8) Invitations and Entertainment (9) Future Plans. As noted above, Nunan (1989) has described his learner-centred curriculum as containing “similar elements and processes” to traditional curricula. In a similar way, the new materials were not radically different from previous courses, but they were specifically designed to allow students to build towards and finally make their own informed choices in the classroom. In addition to the core units of material there were several other key lessons that were taught. The introduction of a choice component was going to be something new to students, who might not even be used to a communicative language teaching (CLT) style. Consequently, part of the first lesson was used to pass the students sheets written in both English and Japanese outlining what was expected of them during the semester and encouraging them to think about learning English and their study goals. There was also one lesson devoted to the consolidation of the materials. As these were produced week by week, the students had to spend one lesson reviewing and referencing their materials into a file that would form part of their final grade.

The first five core units were taught as in previous years, which were ‘teacher-led’ (Davies 2007), where the teacher maintains the pace of the class and organizes the activities for the students. The last five core units involved student choice, where half the lesson time

was allocated to a 'devolved' situation in which students set their own pace and worked on tasks they had chosen to undertake from a selection of pre-prepared tasks. In later lessons students also had the option of creating their own tasks if they so chose.

As noted above, the design of the materials evolved as I experimented with materials in class, judging their effectiveness in lessons as they were used, and also getting feedback from students after several weeks of the course. As time went by, a pattern of activities began to emerge. The types of material are defined as follows:

*Mingling Questionnaires:* These took the form of a set of 10 to 12 instructions starting with the words "Find someone who...". Students would try to find 10 different people in the class who answered yes to their questions, which would start with phrases such as "Can you...", "Do you ...", "Did you ...", "Have you ever...". The task would involve the drilling of target questions, an illustrative example by the teacher, followed by a whole class mingling session.

*Pairwork Questionnaires:* These took the form of 10 to 12 personalised questions that students would ask and answer in pairs. The teacher would drill the questions and provide model answers from his/her own experience. Students would then be placed in pairs to ask and answer the questions.

*Scripted Dialogues:* These were short idealised dialogues centred on the theme of the class. The teacher would drill the dialogue, the students would then practice it in pairs and practice again using some personalisation.

*Grammar:* These would involve students working on gap-fill exercises and writing short model sentences.

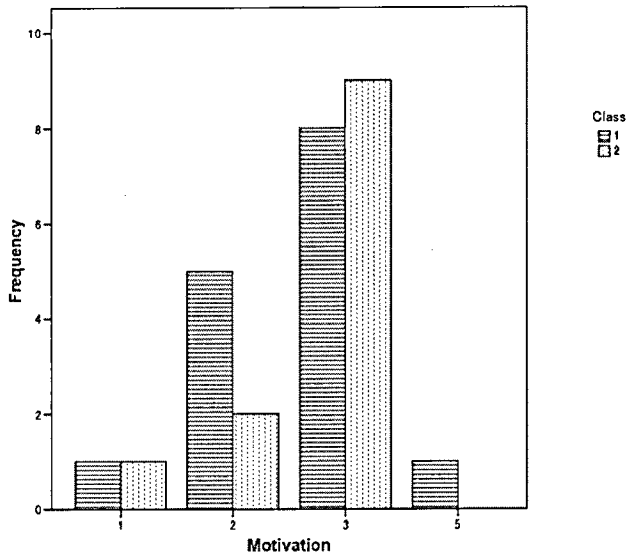
*Vocabulary:* These activities would involve the categorisation of vocabulary items.

*Information Gap Tasks:* These would involve information exchange, involving students in completing an objective such as finding answers to a set of questions, completing a diagram or picture. Unlike the pairwork questionnaires there would be a correct answer or set of answers.

*Dialogue Writing:* Here students would be asked to construct a dialogue around a situation. They would then be asked to practice it.

## RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

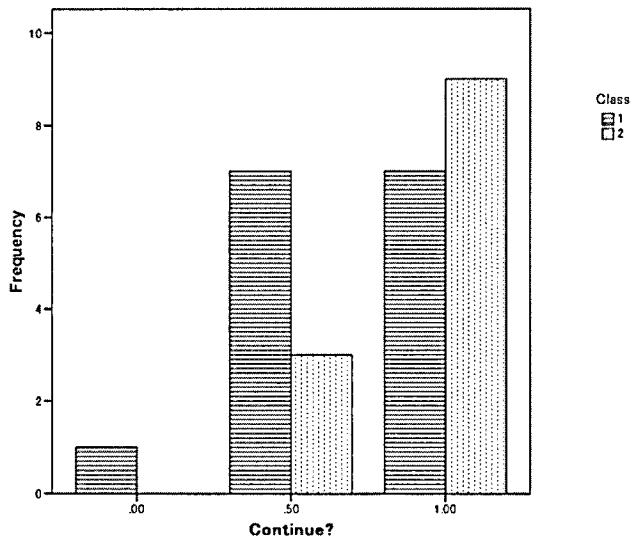
It is useful to note that the motivation level in Class 1 was higher than in Class 2 (Table 2). This may be because Class 1 were taught late on a Friday afternoon, an unpopular time for an elective, so that motivation was not necessarily the result of the way the course was taught, but was because only those most motivated to study English chose the course.



Graph 1

(1 - very highly motivated; 5 - very unmotivated)

In relation to the desire to continue with a course involving student choice, the students were given three options: continue (1) indifference (0.5), not continue (0). The results, shown in Table 2, indicate that students in the smaller class were generally more indifferent towards such a course, while in the larger class students expressed a much stronger desire to continue with it.



Graph 2

In terms of their responses to factors that had a positive effect on motivation, students' responses can be divided into four categories. The largest category was *comprehensibility*, and related in part to the materials and in part to the teaching. The second largest category was the *opportunity to communicate*. For some students it was important to communicate with the teacher; for others it was more interesting to communicate with classmates. A third major category was *the usefulness of the course outside the class*. For example, some students wished to go abroad, while others were interested in understanding movies and dramas in English. Almost no one was worried about their grade, which perhaps indicates the autonomy of college teachers in evaluating their classes.

In terms of factors that had a negative effect on motivation, by far the largest category was *excessive difficulty*, mainly cited in terms of language. Other major factors were the *time of the class*, and the behaviour of other students in terms of *chat*.

Regarding the choice part of the course, students were asked to indicate which task types they had chosen (Table 1). As students did not always indicate how often they had been involved in a task, the results are tabulated to indicate whether students had involved themselves at least once in a particular task type. (As one student had not indicated her choice of materials the total number of students here is 28).

Table 1  
(Total student number: 28)

<u>Task Type</u>	<u>Number of Students involved</u>
Grammar	22
Vocabulary	15
Information Gap	11
Conversation	22
My Task	3

### Examples of Student Responses to the Choice-based Part of the Course

The following seven responses have been chosen for the four levels of motivation indicated by participants and for the kind of response across questions. For example, some students would often write 'nothing in particular' in answer to several questions, while others gave specific insights for nearly all the questions.

#### Highly motivated

*Student 1* wanted to try every task-type, and had done so, but felt that it would have been better for everyone to do the same activities.

*Student 2* had focused only on *Conversation* tasks and felt that she could study in an enjoyable way. However, a negative aspect for her was that she could avoid doing things she disliked.



### Well motivated

*Student 3* focused on *Conversation* tasks because she felt it was good to master conversation. She felt that her motivation was raised because she chose what to study. Her regret was that she was not able to do all the tasks in the time given.

*Student 4* had studied *Vocabulary* and *Conversation* and liked making choices because she could choose what she liked. However, she also felt that she tended to chat during this part of the class, and proposed the setting of time limits.

### Reasonably motivated

*Student 5* had undertaken all the activities except the *Information Gap Tasks*, and thought that the advantage of the choice part of the course was that she could focus on what she wanted to do. However, she was unable to complete everything and would have liked to receive a complete set of the day's materials.

*Student 6* chose *Grammar*, *Information Gap Tasks* and *Conversation* because they seemed interesting, and felt that the choice section enabled her to study things that she was not good at. However, she would have preferred slightly more difficult grammar.

### Unmotivated

*Student 7* studied only *Grammar* because she felt her grammar skills were poor. She felt she did not have enough access to the teacher to check her answers because so many students were asking questions. She felt the advantage of the section was that she could study the things she wasn't good at. She felt that answers should have been passed out at the end of the class.

## DISCUSSION

A number of issues emerge from the results of this small-scale study. The majority of students indicated a preference for continuing with a choice section of the course and only one student was against this. This gave me some satisfaction that the slow build-up to the choice section had been successful in giving students sufficient understanding of task-types that they could make choices and undertake the tasks they had chosen.

As noted above, it was the larger class of students whose members showed a much stronger preference for continuing with a choice-based section of the course. As Breen & Littlejohn (2000b) comment:

“It is perhaps an irony that larger class sizes may make negotiation more difficult whilst, at the same time, making more urgent the need for negotiation to take place... . Larger class sizes inevitably give individual students reduced possibilities of personally contributing to their lessons, and encourage the taking on of the role of a spectator of teaching.” (p.276)

The small amount of data here indicates that in this study, for the larger class the freedom to choose materials was considered more important, but from a teacher perspective there is likely to be an upper limit on this. One of the difficulties noted in the feedback was the lack of access to the teacher during the choice part of class. As a teacher, I found that monitoring during this time was by far the most intense part of the class, and to be effective I estimated that 15 pairs of students would form the upper limit of what was feasible in terms of giving sufficient time to each pair.

In terms of the popularity of each task-type, of the four pre-prepared tasks, the *Information Gap Task* was least popular. While this potentially offered the most opportunity for using English flexibly in a communicative exchange, it was also the most challenging in terms of understanding what needed to be done, and it also presented students with the greatest challenges in terms of vocabulary and grammar. As noted in the analysis of motivation, the most important category was *comprehensibility*. While such tasks were an important part of the course, encouraging students to engage in various communicative strategies to achieve their goals, it would have been better to place the task in the first part of the class, which was teacher-led. In contrast, a pairwork questionnaire would have worked much more effectively in the devolved sessions.

A number of students commented on the negative aspect of the choice part of the course, stating that they were able to avoid tasks that they did not like. This implies that they suspected themselves of avoiding tasks that they considered potentially important. It also reflects the opinion of a teacher participant in a previous study (Davies 2007): “There was also concern expressed about the level of activities that the students’ chose, where one teacher felt that the majority of students tended to vote for easy options” (p.105). Where a task may be considered pedagogically important but challenging, it seems better to put it into the teacher-led part of the lesson.

A further interesting point is the popularity of grammar exercises. In what was a highly oral class, students clearly liked to do some tasks that focused on structure more than meaning. The grammar exercises mainly involved gap-fill activities and could not be described as ‘communicative tasks’. Both Nunan (1989) and Long & Crookes (1992) put value in a focus on form, and students clearly wanted to do some grammar study for the purposes of clarifying their ideas and building accuracy.

With respect to Table 1, the data indicate that, although some tasks were more popular than others, no single task-type was comprehensively covered by all the students. It is perhaps unsurprising that this is the case, but it does indicate that giving students time to operate at their own pace and use their own judgement on a range of tasks helps to address student needs to some extent. As I noted in a previous article (Davies 2007):

“To address the issue of allowing each individual within a class an increased area of discretion, making choices cannot simply take place between a teacher and the whole class. It must reach down to the level of individual students within it, with time being allocated to

smaller groupings within a structured context.” (p.106)

In this sense the course was successful. The seven student responses summarised above indicate that selection of tasks and reaction to the choice part of the course was varied. However, it is also important to note that some students found that the increased freedom that they had in class also had a negative aspect in the form of a propensity to chat.

From a teacher’s point of view, the course was successful, but there were also several drawbacks. In a devolved classroom, a teacher’s role is that of monitor, but with students engaged in different tasks and moving at different speeds, feedback has to be given to each pair. As a teacher, I was far more highly challenged in dealing with students than in the teacher-led part of the class, and several students noted that it was sometimes frustrating waiting to ask questions to me. Even in the *Grammar* tasks, students were encouraged to write out their own examples of key grammar, and this had to be checked. While some students raised the concern that they started to chat during the devolved time, my own experience as a teacher was that devolving the time allowed focused students to get on with tasks by themselves, while I could focus on students who tended to become distracted in teacher-led classes.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note that there are often ideological reasons why applied linguists and teachers promote the idea of negotiation and choice in education. Slembrouck (2000) argues from a position that “fundamentally democratic forms of classroom interaction and decision-making” are desirable. Breen and Littlejohn (2000a) argue that negotiation is part of enlightenment values which have been eroded by capitalism. My own political position in relation to these issues is different. It is a form of pluralism - agonistic liberalism: Ideas and values do not fit into neat and harmonious hierarchies but are often in conflict and incommensurable, so that in the political sphere of life conflict must be mediated through democratically elected institutions. However, as I have argued previously (Davies 2007), classrooms are not inherently democratic, nor are many institutions that exist within democratic societies. It is also worth noting that there are potential cultural value conflicts relating to choice itself. The idea of the freedom to choose tends to be strongly associated with liberal systems. Creating private spheres of discretion where students have greater autonomy may clash with educational values that emphasise the development of group harmony, where individual sacrifices are made for the sake of group cohesion.

My own interest in classroom choice rests on the pragmatic empirical consideration of how much a teacher can know about students and their learning. Given the complex nature of humans and their thought processes, the subtle variations between one individual and another and the limitations of experimental scientific research in the complexities of social life, teachers cannot know what is best for every individual student within a class. Given this limitation, one pragmatic solution is to allow students to develop an understanding of the different ways in which they may study and explore their own learning. With the inevitable

partial understandings that are utilized in classrooms it seems only fair to allow students to take some decisions over their own learning, and it was with this in mind that the study was undertaken. In many ways this is neither liberal nor democratic, as the classroom teacher always has the power to return to a more didactic approach.

It is also important to note that the course was not considered beneficial by all the students, so that allowing choice does not satisfy all needs. Some students indicated that they needed pushing and would not attempt more difficult tasks when left to their own devices. However, a counter argument to this is that the course itself was not completely choice-based and only five units of material incorporated choice. Of these only half the class time was given over to choice-based tasks. To address the problem of difficulty it is quite straightforward to put more challenging tasks into the teacher-led part of the course.

In relation to the classroom practicalities of teaching, creating a choice-based course is a more difficult undertaking than more conventional forms of teaching. It requires the creation of more materials than a conventional course, their gradual introduction to students, and an intense period of monitoring of students engaged in different tasks at the same time. While the results of this study indicate that it is possible to teach such a course, and that given a choice, students engage in different tasks, its planning and execution require the generation of a comprehensive set of carefully planned materials.

Given both the size of this small-scale study and the nature of its central aim, it is not the purpose of the article to argue for generalization. What the study does show is that it is possible to develop a course that allows students to make informed decisions over a selection of material and increase their classroom autonomy to some degree. It offers one possible way of how this can be achieved.

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## 要 約

### 学習者に学習教材を選択させる授業科目の構築

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本研究は、英語授業において学習者自身が学習する教材を選択することができる授業科目(コース)の構築と評価に関するアクション・リサーチの1つである。この授業科目は1学期間かけて徐々に構築される。学習者は、各ペアが授業で学習する教材に関して、与えられた情報に基づいて選択を求められる前に、取り組むことができる様々なタスクを予め体験し理解することができる。このような手法で3つのグループが教授された。

学期の終わりに3つの内の2グループがアンケート調査に参加し、量的データと記述的データとして処理可能な形で回答を求められた。本研究は小規模のデータではあるが、多人数クラスは小人数クラスの場合よりも選択に基づく授業の構築を継続的に好むことが分かった。また、学習する教材に関する選択権を与えられた場合、学習者個々によって選ぶ教材が異なりこと、そして多くの学習者が言語形式の学習に焦点をあてたタスクが有益だと感じていることも分かった。さらに、教材選択において重要な要因となるのは、取り組もうとしているタスクの難易度を学習者がどう捉えているかがあり、より複雑で困難なタスクはペア・ワークをさせるよりも全体指導の形で教授した方が良い。

本研究は、授業において学習者の選択を取り入れる授業科目の構築の可能性を支持している。しかしながら、このようなコース設計は教授に関わる固有の困難や問題点も内包し、従来の教授方法と比較して、期待するような指導をするにはより複雑で困難な点もある。