

# Offering Choices in English Language Classrooms: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Ideas

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## Introduction

This article focuses on the development of ideas on student choice in English language classrooms and is concerned with tertiary education in Japan. Starting with small-scale qualitative research I explored the ideas of some practising native English speaking teachers and used the results to build a set of materials that were then used for several English courses, obtaining feedback from a sample of the students from those courses. This article focuses on the first part of this process: exploring ideas related to choice and interviewing teachers to develop ideas in relation to the practical context of English language classes. The main type of classes under consideration is that taught in the university semesters, running for 15 weeks and usually taught once a week.

In relation to the whole process there were two key issues that emerged. The initial problem that drove the research 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 the students? From my own experience in Japanese tertiary education, teaching tends to be pitched at the median student, a level that is too easy for the most able students and too difficult for the least able students. Consideration of this issue is complicated if the students within a class have different learning styles or preferences for learning activities. The second issue relates to the first and concerns the engagement of students in classroom activity through placing some decision-making in their hands. While allowing choices may be challenging in terms of classroom and course organisation, it offers solutions to problems arising from the more didactic option of classrooms where teachers make all the decisions. Nunan (1995), cites Widdows and Voller, arguing that Japanese students do not like to be passive:

“Students do not like classes in which they sit passively, reading or translating. They do not like classes where the teacher controls everything. They do not like reading English literature very much even when they are literature majors. Thus it is clear that the vast majority of English classes are failing to satisfy learner need in any way.” (p.144)

However, implementing a course involving choices and decision-making needs to be carefully considered in the light of classroom realities. The purpose of the research reported here was to find out how teachers themselves offered choices to students, and their perceptions of the

positive and negative effects.

In the Japanese tertiary education context, innovation by teachers is often possible because many of them have a great deal of freedom in terms of control over their courses. While the overall system of Japanese education is often categorized as bureaucratic, tertiary education has considerable autonomy compared to secondary education in Japan. Individual teachers are often responsible for setting their own syllabuses, selecting their own teaching materials, evaluating and grading their own students. In this respect, many university teachers have the institutional freedom to innovate. Constraints to action tend to lie more with what is culturally acceptable to students than with any imposition on teachers by institutional authorities.

## Literature Review

Ideas on student choice fall into a number of different areas. Various writers (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000a; Slembrouck, 2000; Clarke, 1991; Martyn, 2000; Norris & Spencer, 2000) have written about choice under the umbrella term of the *negotiated syllabus*. While negotiation and choice are not identical, the search for agreement through negotiation implies the making of a decision and this implies a choice. Nunan (1995) has incorporated choices under the term *learner centredness* where they are used to reduce the mismatch between teaching and learning. In this section I consider both sets of ideas, exploring their similarities and differences, and create a theoretical background for use in the interviews themselves.

### The negotiated syllabus

Breen and Littlejohn (2000a) define the negotiated syllabus on the basis of procedural negotiation. This is in contrast to Widdowson's (1978) definition of personal negotiation of meaning and the interactive negotiation used to understand another's communication. They define procedural negotiation as follows:

“This kind of negotiation is exemplified by discussions between people who are likely to have different interests or different points of view but who seek to reach agreement on a matter, solve a shared problem or establish ways of working that are acceptable to them.”  
(Breen and Littlejohn 2000a:8)

Under this definition students may negotiate on content or process. In terms of content they may determine the topics and language areas of a syllabus, in terms of process they may negotiate on how they will study. Writers' comments on the results of negotiation yield mixed results. For example, Martyn (2000) found its use successful when teaching nurses in Pakistan, who were highly motivated and committed to the professionalisation of nursing. In contrast Slembrouck (2000), teaching in a Belgian university, found negotiation problematic. There are a multitude of factors that may have affected such results, including cultural issues, age, familiarity with other students and internal hierarchies. For example the nurses may

have been used to working as a team and had long experience of working together. The Belgian university students may have been studying together for the first time.

Slembrouck's case is illustrative of a number of potential problems for the negotiated syllabus. He argued for one within his faculty and despite reservations by various members of the academic staff, was allowed to proceed with it. He negotiated the syllabus with his students and facilitated its implementation. There were problems with attendance, and this tended to cause problems with negotiation since students who missed classes would tend to negotiate on issues that had been decided in previous classes. At the end of the semester the faculty decided to replace the course with one that was more traditional in approach.

One of the reasons for Slembrouck's classroom negotiation stemmed from "a political conviction that 'critical' goals are very important in education". One of these was that "fundamentally democratic forms of classroom interaction and decision-making" were desirable. This raises the important issue of the definition of 'fundamentally democratic forms of classroom interaction'. Democracy itself has evolved over a long period of time incorporating individual rights and duties. Mature democracies defend individuals against the tyranny of the majority and have well-established processes for decision-making. As a teacher, Slembrouck had a different role to that of the students. In such cases, where a teacher has institutional power, how should he/she define his/her role and the parameters of democratic decision-making? Within the class there was a problem with student absences. However, was this implicitly acceptable to most students, whether attendees or truants, who felt they held democratic power? In many cases the majority of students may have different ideas from the minority and total consensus is very difficult to achieve. A motivated majority or minority may set the agenda for a syllabus which goes against the wishes of many students.

A second point involves asymmetries of knowledge. Student conceptions of what they wanted to do were very different from the teacher's ideas. In Slembrouck's case the students rejected most of the teacher's proposals and tended to focus on more traditional ways of learning. This is unsurprising considering their state of knowledge. Their university tended to follow traditional ways of teaching and, having no mental map for the new ideas presented, they consequently made prudent judgements on how to proceed in this absence of knowledge. This is reflected in Breen and Littlejohn's (2000b) comment on the course:

"...it may be that the negotiation that was introduced was so very different from what students had previously been used to that the 'leap' they were required to make was too great. In this case a gradual or selective approach to the introduction of negotiation may have produced different results and enabled over time the development of mutual trust, confidence and responsibility upon which negotiated work depends." (p.292)

While negotiation implies choice, it is important to note that in Slembrouck's case the main emphasis of this syllabus was on negotiation itself for both practical classroom reasons and for progressive critical reasons. One of the problems in having critical goals for

fundamentally democratic forms of classroom interaction is that classrooms are *prima facie* fundamentally undemocratic. There are usually large asymmetries of institutional power between a teacher and a student. Also, at undergraduate level there are usually large asymmetries of knowledge in relation to the subject under study. In such circumstances negotiation may be one-sided and will usually be introduced by the teacher. Similarly offering choices does not necessarily imply some democratic form of classroom behaviour, but it may encourage students to evaluate possibilities and make decisions.

### **Nunan's learning-centred classroom**

Nunan (1995), commenting on the mismatch between what is taught and what is learned, suggests allowing students more choice in what they do. An element of this involves developing learner autonomy. As Nunan (1997) observes, this can vary in degree. In comparison to Slembrouck's (2000) experiences, Nunan's (1995) system is designed to allow learners to develop in such a way that they can make informed choices:

"Learners are therefore systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn." (p.134)

He specifies three domains: the experiential content domain, the learning process domain and the language content domain. In this article I focus on the first two domains, which have a very direct link with the practicalities of English language teaching. In contrast the last domain, while addressing some important issues, is much more theoretical. My purpose was not to see whether teachers agreed with theory, but to ask them to reflect on and narrate their own actions in relation to their courses, and then analyse their ideas in relation to background theory. While the language content domain was considered in the design of teaching materials, it was not used in the interview process.

The experiential content domain comes closest to a syllabus in Widdowson's (1990) sense of a scheme for teachers. It is the content and goals of a course. Nunan (*ibid*) specifies five levels of implementation of this domain: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. Learners can start by being made aware of the aims and goals of their classes. They can then become involved in the selection of aims and goals. After this they can adapt the content and goals of their programme. They can then create their own goals and objectives. Finally they can go beyond the world of the classroom and make links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond.

In the learning process domain the key focus is on the way that the content is taught. Nunan (1995) points out that student preferences and teacher preferences can differ. A key focus is strategies, and Nunan (*ibid*) summarises Rubin, noting that he "found that all learners do apply strategies and that certain of these strategies seem to be consistently used by good language learners". Nunan states that the implication here is that once strategies used by

good language learners are identified, they can be taught to less effective language learners. In this instance there is a danger of creating a cipher, a non-existent ideal student, against which other students may be judged. While some kind of deficiency analysis cannot be ruled out, it is worth considering the alternatives: Students are at different stages of development or have different learning preferences. Nunan (*ibid*) incorporates this to some extent into his system, allowing groups to work on materials in an order of their choosing and to make limited selections.

### **Resolving negotiation and choice**

In this study I have argued that negotiation and choice are not the same. However, I have argued that negotiation implies choice, but is this reversible? Does choice imply negotiation? In answering this question it is important to re-evaluate Breen and Littlejohn's (2000a) separation of negotiation into three parts. They place emphasis on negotiation where the participants seek agreement. This is in contrast to the negotiation of meaning in dialogue and the negotiation of meaning between a reader and a text. However, it is possible to make a case for a fourth form of negotiation. Conflict may be internalised or, in the process of learning new information, may conflict with other internalised ideas. Such conflict may lead to development as the student attempts to resolve it. This may be externalised through dialogue, but it may initially require a student to develop his/her own thinking alone through inner reflection. While the negotiated syllabus places emphasis on externalised procedural negotiation, the use of choice in the classroom may involve both external procedural negotiation and inner negotiation. A second issue involves the types of choice that might be involved. Here I would like to create a distinction between what I term 'broad choice' and what I define as 'controlled choice'. In controlled choice the chooser is faced with two or more different options and can evaluate the probable benefits of each. In broad choice a student evaluates or provides one option and accepts, rejects or alters it. I would argue that broad choice tends to lead to external procedural negotiation where students and teachers develop ideas from suggestions and seek some form of agreement. In controlled choice task frameworks are pre-established by a teacher and students evaluate their potential for learning. This may still lead to external negotiation where students are working in small groups but it can also apply to the case where students are working individually. In this latter case external negotiation is not necessary.

### **Method**

In light of the above analysis and direction of thought I set out to investigate teachers' perceptions of negotiation and choice-making in their classrooms. I conducted interviews with four full-time native English speaking teachers working at university level. Between them they had twenty-six years of experience of English teaching in full-time Japanese tertiary education.

The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on teachers' histories and the use of

choice in areas such as syllabus planning, classroom practice and evaluation methods. In each area questions were used to establish whether the interviewees allowed choices, and if so, how they did this and their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. While the terms 'choice' and 'negotiation' were used, interviewees often had difficulty working with the term 'choice', and it became easier to develop ideas and encourage reflection on choice through ideas on negotiation. This may have been partly due to the greater use of the term in ELT research, rather than 'choice', which does not have the same symbolic resonance. All the interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and summarised. In this article quotations from the interviews have not been altered, but I have punctuated them to bring out the meaning.

## Results and discussion

A variety of ideas were generated in the interview process, covering syllabus, classroom practice and evaluation. Issues relating to broad and controlled choice were most evident in the area of syllabus. In terms of classes taught through a semester, three different approaches were outlined:

- A. Students wrote their ideas on slips of paper, which were then collected and organised into a syllabus by the teacher.
- B. Students were presented with a list of topic items by their teacher. They circled the topics they wished to study and the teacher made the final syllabus on the basis of the most popular topics.
- C. Slots were placed into a planned syllabus and students suggested topics to the teacher for those slots.

In relation to categorization, (A) best fits the idea of broad choice, (B) controlled choice, and (C) is ambiguous, depending on the teacher's negotiation policy. (A) presented the greatest number of problems, in terms of creating a coherent course and in the time and commitment required in creating or finding the materials. However, there were also issues with controlled choice, especially in relation to asymmetries of knowledge and experience. One interviewee pointed out that there is an asymmetry of information between the teacher, who has a strong idea of the possibilities for the class, and the students, who can only relate their experience back to previous courses that have often been taught in a very different way from the approach of the teacher of the new course. Therefore, at the initial stages of a new course they can only make uninformed choices. An instance of informed choice was reported by a teacher who had taught a short intensive course with the aid of a Japanese student who wanted to become a teacher. On the first day of the course they taught a variety of activities to the students and at the end of the day obtained feedback on the activities that students wished to pursue. This feedback was used to design the next day's activities. This case is different from the others because it involved a Japanese instructor, and the interviewee noted

*She was not only a role model for them but they could feel close to her. I think if I'd been there on my own I probably wouldn't have got a reaction like that.*

While taking this into account, it is still useful to note that this was a case in the interviews where the students were exposed to teaching before they were asked to make choices. They were inducted into the teachers' way of teaching before being asked to decide on how the course should proceed.

Regarding teaching over a semester of classes, the offering of choices in the classroom appeared to be used for a very specific purpose: keeping class and teacher together, especially at times when classes were stalling. This was one of the most important ways it was used. Interviewees were sensitive to the mood of their classes and the ability of the students to achieve initially set objectives. As experienced teachers they were using choice and negotiation as classroom tools. Such instances of choice were not pre-planned but were used for overcoming problems. For example, where students were becoming trapped in an activity, one interviewee would find a way to finish it more quickly than planned and then offer students choices from a reserve of supplementary materials. In a similar vein another interviewee would ask tired students whether they wanted to do the next activity in the lesson plan (laid out on the board) or would prefer to go to another activity.

One of the most positive areas for allowing choice occurred where teachers fixed a process but allowed students to choose their own content. One teacher pointed out that a lot of his/her classes revolve around students generating their own materials. Students are required to find out about a topic area and report back. While the teacher chose the topic the students had some flexibility in what they did. Many of his/her classes involved students creating their own questions to ask other students.

Reviewing material that had been taught was also a way in which students were given the freedom to choose an area. They would be asked to review material that had been covered, select an area and make a presentation on it. In essence, the teacher fixed the process of the activity, while the students developed the content. This fits with the idea of scaffolding and mediation where the teacher mediates by structuring the process, rather than the content.

In the area of evaluation, there was an illustration of negotiation at work. One teacher had negotiated with students on how they should be assessed, outlining five different processes of evaluation, and also offering them the option of developing their own ideas on processes of evaluation. Each student was allowed to choose two of the options and the teacher selected the three most popular choices for that semester's evaluation:

*I gave them the choice of what they wanted to be graded on, so in the first term I graded them on an interview, a speech and one other assignment. And in the second term I gave them a choice of five different things and I said, "Please pick two of them which you want to be graded on" and from that I actually chose which ones I would grade them on.*

This is mainly a case of controlled choices, where a practitioner specifies a number of possibilities that he or she knows to be effective, and then allows students to select from within them. Here, group activity grading was a popular option for the students, where there would be small-group interviews. Students were able to opt for systems of evaluation that were comfortable for them. However, in this instance the teacher was also open to suggestions, which might have led to negotiation on a new method of evaluation.

Two teachers pointed out that there were times when their words seemed to imply a choice, but in fact, by the nature of their position in the classroom they were essentially forcing a result. One teacher had strongly felt that students would benefit from an activity involving graded readers. Initially one lesson was taught using the readers, after which students were offered the choice of continuing in the same way or reverting to language games which had been used in the first semester. However, the teacher had forcefully recommended the graded reader option:

*Now although I gave them the choice I followed it up with "I think this is best for your English", so in effect I gave them the choice but I didn't really give them the choice. They all actually said "we think we should do this" because in reality I didn't really want anyone to say "I don't want to do this."*

This comment illustrates the power of the teacher in the negotiation process. The teacher outlined two alternatives but made his/her position on the situation very clear and in doing so was able to control the situation. In a more minor way another teacher pointed out that there are instances where a small minority of students want to do something, and he/she would check with the rest of the class to get agreement:

*I usually ask everyone to make sure but then you wonder if people are being honest about it, because then they feel they have to agree with you. If I say "OK, there's some interest in this. Shall we do this?" it's a kind of wrap up.*

These comments show the teachers' awareness of their power relations with students. While they appeared to signal that there was a choice available to the students, they knew that this was not really the case. It is also important to note that power was sometimes used to benefit minority ideas, as in the second case. Sometimes only a few students vote for an option, but should a teacher disregard it? One teacher incorporated all student suggestions but used voting to create an order:

*Sometimes we just choose an order. For example, I just take that to mean they are interested in all of those, so I say, "OK, shall we do hers?" even if we have to, we'll put it off to next week or whatever.*



There was also concern expressed about the level of activities that students chose, where one teacher felt that the majority of students tended to vote for easy options. The teacher wanted students to undertake some more challenging activities and, while accepting the majority opinion in most cases, would back his/her own view with minority support in order to incorporate a few challenging activities. This indicates the power asymmetries in making collective choices. Suggestions tend to be filtered through the teacher who has the power to give or withhold assent to majority or minority decisions.

## Conclusion

This study has been used to generate ideas, anchoring theoretical perspectives with the reflections of practising teachers working in tertiary education. The interviews with teachers raised a number of interesting ways of passing some decision-making to students, and also highlighted some of the problems. In assessing both the theoretical ideas from the literature and the ideas generated by teachers, there appear to be two related issues that emerge: (1) how to engage with students and (2) how to allow each student more freedom to progress individually. Most of the ideas generated fall into the category of engaging the class as a whole. Regarding both issues, the most salient point to emerge is that allowing students choices is a process which needs to be spread over time since it is important for students to make informed choices. To do this they must gain an understanding of the types of activity on offer. This understanding is best gained gradually as they experience the range of activities that a teacher will eventually offer as choices. In the same way that teachers need to structure content, they also need to structure such processes. In the practicalities of English language teaching giving choices can often be a classroom tool, part of a teacher's resources for managing a class and creating rapport with his/her students. To go beyond this it is necessary to focus on choice itself as a key objective in courses and to build students awareness of the rationales behind student activities.

For teachers who have to deal with classes of over thirty students, one challenge is to ensure that each student finds a way of learning that maximises his/her potential. Activities in this research which did address such issues were those that focused on process activities where students were set more general tasks to fulfil, giving them space to make decisions. In relation to negotiation, Breen and Littlejohn (2000b) note its importance in larger classes:

"It is perhaps an irony that larger class sizes may appear to 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)

However, as I noted in the literature review, whole class negotiation does not necessarily address this issue, and may only suit a small minority of students. Also, process activities

may be selected by a teacher without classroom negotiation. 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. The movement towards a more devolved classroom that involves greater choices and decision-making requires careful planning, initial implementation and a constant interaction between theoretical ideas and classroom practicalities.

Finally, it is important to note that this small-scale study has focused on native speaking teachers of English and their ideas on choice. It has not incorporated the ideas of Japanese teachers of English who form the vast majority of English language teachers in Japan. As noted earlier, the use of choice and negotiation can involve ideological and political stances in addition to practical issues in teaching. The cultural issue of how easily negotiation and choice fit within a broader context in Japanese education will be addressed in a subsequent article that also evaluates the implementation of a course based on the ideas generated in this study.

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## 要 約

### 英語授業設計における学習者の意見を取り入れることの可能性 —— 教師の意見の質的分析 ——

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本論文は、日本の大学英語教師が授業内容や方法に関して、可能な範囲内で学生に選択の機会を与える方法について議論するものである。Breen and Littlejohn (2000) による“negotiated syllabus” (学習者との交渉によるシラバス)、Nunan (1988) による“learner-centered curriculum” (学習者中心のカリキュラム) の主張をもとに、小グループの大学英語母語教師への“semi-structured interview” (半ば予め組み立てられた面接) のデータを利用することによって、学習者に選択を与えることの可能性を分析し、さらにその利点と欠点を考察した。

データの分析に際しては、制限の緩やかな (broad) 選択と制限の強い (controlled) 選択に区分した。分析・考察の結果、手続き上の交渉 (procedural negotiation) を伴うかどうかに関係なく、学生による選択は様々な効果的な方法で与えられ得ることが分かった。教師にとっては、授業の計画や評価において、また過程を重視する課題を用いることを通して、学生に選択させることが可能な場合がある。さらに、この手法は学生が先生と一体感を持ち、教師が授業に活気を与えるために教室でおこなう手段の一つとして使用される。

結論として「選択」を与えることの利点をさらに言及することは可能である。しかしながら、そのためには綿密な計画が必要であり、そして学生が体系的に選択することができるような授業へと徐々に導いていくことが必要である。