

A NEGOTIATED SYLLABUS: POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES AND DRAWBACKS IN ENGLISH PREPARATORY PROGRAMS AT UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

One of the most basic process in language teaching contexts is the design of the curriculum and syllabus. Although there are certain models in the literature, changing needs of language teaching leads to new ones which appeals to the learners better than the others. One of these new models is the negotiated syllabus in language classrooms. This study aims to theoretically discuss the potential implementation of a negotiated syllabus in English preparatory programs at universities in Turkey. The definitions of a negotiated syllabus and the situations where a negotiated syllabus is necessary are presented and then, they are associated with the cases in preparatory programs by discussing the common points. Finally, the advantages and probable drawbacks of a negotiated syllabus in these programs are presented and several solutions are suggested for the stated drawbacks. Finally, the paper summarizes the important points and proposes a discussion point that would lead to further research studies.

Key Words: A Negotiated Syllabus, Potential Advantages, Drawbacks, English Preparatory Programs, Universities.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum design in language teaching process is a very broad term which involves several variables that need to be focused on before and during this process. Since it is a broad term with so many variables, several curriculum models (Nation & Macalister, 2010; Graves 2000; Murdoch; 1989) have been proposed in the literature to systematize and present it in a principled way. In all these models, there are several items which are mainly related to out of class issues such as gathering data on the learner profile or investigating the physical facilities of the environment. On the other hand, several variables in these models are closely related to the in-class issues which basically involve learning and teaching process together with teachers, learners, activities, assessment and monitoring. These elements which are experienced with the participation of teachers and learners are combined under an umbrella term called syllabus.

According to some scholars, syllabus is different from curriculum. In the curriculum design model presented by Nation & Macalister (2010), syllabus refers to the inner circles which consist of goals, format and presentation, content and sequencing, monitoring and assessment. According to Breen (1984: 47), "syllabus is a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students' learning." Nunan (1999: 73) states that "a syllabus consists of list of content to be taught through a course of study." This list of content determines the type of syllabus that will be used for the course. When the content is based on the functions of a language, it is called as a functional syllabus. If the content is organized through different tasks, it is a task-based syllabus. The content could be based on certain topics, which make it a topical syllabus. As it is seen, in decision making for a

syllabus, what should be in it basically determines the type of syllabus that will be used in the teaching process. However, in one of the current practices in curriculum design process, rather than what should be included in a syllabus, the focus is on how the syllabus is made; that is called a negotiated syllabus.

NEGOTIATED SYLLABUS AND THE CASE IN PREPARATORY PROGRAMS

“A negotiated syllabus involves the teacher and the learners working together to make decisions at many of the parts of the curriculum design process” (Nation & Macalister, 2010: 149). It provides learners’ active involvement in the shared tasks of developing a syllabus via the process of negotiating with the teacher. Breen & Littlejohn (2000: 1) makes a to the point definition and describes negotiated syllabus as “the discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organized.” Due to the shift towards learner centeredness, autonomy and collaboration in language teaching, negotiated syllabus has gained importance in curriculum design process in most of language teaching contexts.

In Turkey, an EFL context, there are a lot of language teaching settings, but probably the most intensive and principled ones are the English preparatory programs at universities. These programs provide intensive language courses to the students in their first year at universities in various levels for general purposes and their departmental studies. The program starts immediately with the beginning of the new academic year and continues to the end of it. At the end of an academic year, the students take a proficiency exam and whether they pass the program is determined according to their scores in this exam. As these programs are quite loaded and massive ones, there are of course several issues leading to some problems. Depending on the informal discussions with instructors from various preparatory programs, one of the most problematic issues they face is related to their curriculum design process since they do not have a national curriculum applied in all programs. It is thought quite challenging to make a decision on the syllabus that will appeal to their learners who come from different socio-cultural and socio-economical backgrounds with different levels of English, needs and wants. When these programs are analyzed carefully in terms of syllabus decision process, it can be seen that the situation is similar to the ones presented by Breen & Littlejohn (2000: 272) in which a negotiated syllabus is almost unavoidable.

1. Where the teacher and students have different backgrounds.
2. Where time is short and the most useful choices must be made.
3. Where there is a very diverse group of students and there is a need to find common ground.
4. Where initial needs analysis is not possible.

As it is clearly seen the conditions in English preparatory programs at universities in Turkey are quite similar to the ones in which a negotiated syllabus could be useful and practical. For this reason, it can be said that a negotiated syllabus which is implemented carefully and in a planned way may have several advantages for teachers and learners in English preparatory programs in Turkey in EFL teaching process.

THE REASONS FOR A NEGOTIATED SYLLABUS IN PREPARATORY PROGRAMS

First of all, it will be explanatory to focus briefly on the situations presented by Breen & Littlejohn (2000) and their connection and similarity with the situation in preparatory programs.

1. Where the teacher and students have different backgrounds

One of the common situations in most of these language teaching contexts in Turkey is that there becomes an atmosphere at the beginning of the academic year in which the teacher and the students have totally different backgrounds and do not know anything about each other. They usually have no idea about each other’s way of thinking at the beginning because they come from different socio-cultural and socio-economical backgrounds

and see each other in class for the first time. No matter what the demographic features the teacher and the students have, they begin to know each other in time due to the differences they have.

2. Where time is short and the most useful choices must be made

The most challenging issue for preparatory programs in syllabus decision process is probably the problem of time limitation. The academic year begins one or two weeks after the students register for the university. Most of the time, it is not possible to give the right decisions for the current learner profile in terms of syllabus design. The teachers in these programs make choices and get prepared for the upcoming academic year in a one-month period, which is a very short time give the right decision that will contribute to the learning and teaching process.

3. Where there is a very diverse group of students and there is a need to find common ground

In Turkey, students take a university entrance exam when they graduate from high school and they prefer universities according to their scores in that exam. The students in a certain university have close scores in the exam but they are from different cities and regions of Turkey. Since Turkey has many variables in terms of social, cultural, ethnic and economic elements, English preparatory programs have a very diverse group of students with different lifestyles, social abilities, beliefs and ethnic origins every year. In such an atmosphere, a prominent step for teachers is to provide or set a common ground for this diverse student group.

4. Where initial needs analysis is not possible

Conducting a needs analysis, which provides significant data about learner profile in terms of their needs, lacks and wants in language teaching process, is one of the crucial points in curriculum design process. However, while designing their curriculum and deciding on the syllabus that will be appropriate for their learners, preparatory programs do not have a chance to conduct an initial needs analysis. After the results of the university entrance exam are announced, students usually register for their programs at the beginning of September and the academic year starts at the third week of it. Due to this time limitation and many other factors such as heavy work load and lack of academic staff, it is mostly not possible to carry out a needs analysis for learners at the beginning of the term.

These are the situations which are also the common points of preparatory programs in Turkey and the conditions in which a negotiated syllabus is almost unavoidable. At this point, where there are so many common grounds, it could be beneficial to mention the advantages of a negotiated syllabus for preparatory programs and its potential drawbacks.

THE ADVANTAGES OF A NEGOTIATED SYLLABUS AND ITS POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS

Firstly, a negotiated syllabus provides an alternative to the traditional role of teachers which is an authoritarian one who is the source of knowledge in classroom and makes the decisions related to classroom setting on his/her own. In a negotiated syllabus, teachers in preparatory programs can determine their classroom procedures such as the pace of work, the type of activities and assessment elements with their class members. By doing so, these teachers may have a more supporting and guiding role which is the ideal role of teacher in current pedagogy. The negotiation process helps the teachers in these programs know the students who they have just met and so they become more conscious about the needs, wants and lacks of their learners. Being aware of these features, teachers arrange the tasks, activities, supplementary materials that will definitely appeal to the learners. With the help of the negotiation process, teachers will be aware of the topics, issues and subjects that attract the attention of their students so that they can prepare more fruitful lessons. Such kind of a consciously preparation for an academic year will also contribute to the self-development of the teachers. Thanks to this process, the teachers in preparatory programs will not be a classical teacher who depends on a certain book and does everything according to it, but will follow the current methodology and materials that help a better teaching.

A negotiated syllabus may also have several advantages for learners in preparatory programs. Many of these programs design their syllabi and courses without any kind of reference to the consultation with their learners. In these contexts, teachers and administrators make most of the decisions regarding classroom work and their potential learners' needs. As Boon (2011) states, learners are absent from the key decision making process as the teachers or administrators work alone to predict, interpret, and map out a pre-designed syllabus the aim of which is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge over a certain period of time. At this point, several misunderstandings occur and this may slow down the learning process for many learners. However, through a negotiated syllabus in these programs, the learners become actively involved in negotiating the purposes, content, management and means of assessment. Students set their own goals and become highly motivated to achieve these goals, which can also be a solution for the demotivated students in these programs. Therefore, students approach learning tasks knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. As Nation & Macalister (2010) suggest, involving the learners in shaping the syllabus has a strong effect on motivation, satisfaction and commitment to the course. They take a greater responsibility for their own learning and this promotes their power of learning and autonomy in this learning process.

The advantages of a negotiated syllabus in university preparatory programs for teachers and learners and why it could be useful in these programs have been mentioned so far. As in other kinds of methodological issues, a negotiated syllabus may also have some drawbacks. These problematic points may have various origins but their possible solutions could be found through negotiation and collaboration.

The first and a probable problem with a negotiated syllabus in English preparatory programs may stem from the term "negotiation" with Turkish students who mostly come from a background where teacher is the source of knowledge and highly respected. The students may feel uncomfortable to talk with the teacher about what should be done in class. For such a case, the students may have an orientation of one or two weeks through which they could be trained on the negotiation process. After this training, a conservative example of a negotiated syllabus by Nation & Macalister (2010), in which the students first start with a set of program having a variety of activities and then they start negotiating after being familiar with a shared classroom atmosphere, could be a starting point. Such a strategy makes the students feel more comfortable and encourage them to participate in the decision making process which will determine the goals and content of the learning and teaching process.

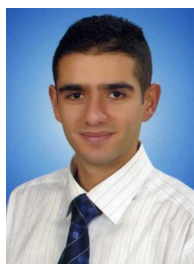
Another problematic issue for a negotiated syllabus in these programs could be the assessment issue. Although Smith (2000) describes and proposes an effective way of how to negotiate assessment in language teaching classrooms, this issue is much more challenging in such intensive programs as in preparatory schools because there are so many classes and levels. At this point, the assessment issue of such a diverse context could be handled through well-working testing offices with qualified staff. A close coordination of the teachers and testing office is the key factor. The teachers will inform testing offices about what they cover in their lessons, which skills they focus on and what to cover in the exams. The testing offices will prepare the materials and exams depending on this information. Such a strategic coordination contributes to the well-implementation of a negotiated syllabus in preparatory programs.

CONCLUSION

This paper synthesizes a potential implementation of a negotiated syllabus in English preparatory programs at universities in Turkey. It focuses on the advantages of it for learners and teachers, and provides some reasonable solutions to the potential problems that students and teachers may face during the process. Many studies in the literature (Boomer et. al., 1992; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Huang, 2006; Nguyen, 2010) have shown that classroom negotiation makes the teaching program more appropriate for learners' needs, encourage students and increase their self-confidence, develop learner-centeredness and autonomy.

Depending upon on these positive impacts, this paper suggests that the implementation of a negotiated syllabus should be open to discussion by scholars and curriculum designers in Turkey and some possible ways should be found to integrate this syllabus into the curriculum of preparatory programs. The aim of this paper is not to propose a negotiated syllabus model since it could only be the result of further research studies that will be conducted in preparatory programs via empirical data and great care. It only aims to be a kind of start for this process and create awareness for a syllabus type that could be practical and useful for preparatory programs in the future.

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