

Curriculum negotiation at NHK: Meeting the needs and demands of adult learners

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Bio Data

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Curriculum negotiation, the act of teacher-student collaboration to determine a syllabus, is a procedure that various researchers have explored and explained. This writer has engaged in this process in NHK Culture Center English classes because of the great variety in the language needs and personal demands of his students and other institution-related conditions. It is argued that this alternative pedagogical practice can successfully allow mature students to create their own curriculum responsibly, making the learning process more meaningful and interesting to them. It is also suggested that the methodology herein described may be adaptable to other second language learner contexts.

The prestigious NHK Culture Center, which began offering a variety of courses (including language) to the general public in 1979, advertises that 750,000 people attend its classes annually and that "[t]he large number of its continuing 'members' [students] is proof of the high satisfaction and trust for the classes they offer" (NHK Culture, 2009, para.1, translated by author). True, but it cannot be because of the image I project in my NHK classes. My stern face seldom offers the beckoning service-industry smile important in meet-the-public Japan. I visibly fidget if my students show up late and inquiringly stare at them if they do not do their homework, but they grin in the first instance and share their work across tables in the second. Yet, I do offer a collateral presence, and purpose,

シラバスを決める為の教師と学習者の協働活動である、カリキュラム交渉は、様々な研究者が研究している教授方法の1つである。NHK文化センターの英語クラスでは、受講生のニーズや要望が多様であり、またこの学校独自の状況も考えて、この方法が取り入れられた。この型にはまらない教授方法により、大人の学習者にとって学習過程がより意味深く、興味深いものとなり、彼らが責任をもって自らのカリキュラムを上手く構築することができるようになる論じる。さらに、この方法は他の第二言語学習者の場合にも採り入れられると提案する。

at our frequent parties and after-class coffee time. As well, my students do wholeheartedly affirm that they want to improve their English language skills, and many of them have continued attending my classes over the years, despite their weekday work responsibilities and weekend family and community obligations.

However, I wonder: Could a part of our mix be that they like their class because we collaboratively construct our curriculum through negotiation every three months? Does this methodology merit serious consideration for second language (SL) contexts? To explore the latter question, this paper 1) describes the curriculum-negotiation (CN) methodology this writer has used in his NHK classes, 2) makes observations that might help other educators implement similar methodology in other contexts, and 3) explains general issues that might be encountered with this approach.

Curriculum negotiation

Explained as a way in which students can share classroom authority (Kordalewski, 1999), student-teacher CN is not new. Conceptually, Dewey (1977) foreshadows this with discussion of the importance of purpose-forming learner participation and of the exigency of personal-interest education (Dewey, 1966), and Freire (2008) refocuses these ideas with his censure of the lack of learner consultation in the program decision-making process. The literature also reflects various CN methodologies and evaluations. Shor (1996) provides an exhaustive description of his pedagogy with U.S. working class college students, while other researchers explain their success in SL contexts (e.g., Armanet & Obesejty, 1981), some reportedly with less-motivated learners (e.g., Littlejohn, 1983) and others with well-motivated ones (e.g., Norris & Spencer, 2000), and offer critical balance in support of student autonomy and learner-centered education (e.g., Clarke, 1991).

With their explanation of personal and interactive negotiation as unobservable psychological and overt social confirmations of meaning, respectively, Breen and Littlejohn (2000) explain that procedural negotiation is an agreement on a future process within the context of a social setting (for our purposes, the classroom) by

which students can collaborate with teachers in mapping out course activities, content, purposes, and evaluation. In theory, the idea is that dialog will encourage learners to understand their responsibility in their own learning process, motivating them to engage positively in its activities so that they can accomplish the objectives they have helped determine. Importantly, this learner-centered idea is democratic, handing over some of the rights and responsibilities of their education to learners who gain accountability for their own education decisions.

For my purposes, however, CN became necessary because of conditions at NHK which are surely encountered by other SL educators who instruct individuals or groups in similar “free” situations. For one, my students are not tested for entrance, placement, or advancement purposes, meaning that I must teach students whose English proficiency ranges perhaps from high elementary to high intermediate, in turn meaning their input can help me understand better their language needs, to which I can respond more appropriately in, for example, my own choices or adaptations of materials. As well, there is much incentive to accept all students because of the community-service nature of the program and because of the specter of class cancellations that small student numbers raise, which means I must try to accommodate all of their English education demands. Finally, NHK students can miss classes without grade or institutional consequences, which means I must isolate my lessons so their content does not greatly carry over to other sessions, which could confuse students who have missed previous classes or leave those who will miss successive ones with a feeling of incompleteness.

In my case, because of these conditions, each lesson is a capsule, independent from previous or successive lessons, which my students at the beginning of each term help decide, and evaluation consists of ongoing post-activity feedback, rather than diagnostic tests. With no textbook, all materials are teacher or student generated to allow us to explore the skills, activities, and topics that my student professionals of different linguistic strengths and personal interests demand. As we shall see, much syllabus planning is left to these students of such disparate needs and backgrounds.

My NHK students

Many of my NHK students have been in my class for a very long time. Ranging in age from their mid-40s to almost 80, they are motivated professionals involved in various endeavors. One attends international meetings and is at NHK to build listening and presentation skills. Another likes short stories but needs business English at work. Still another exhibits her art and wants to maintain her English to communicate with friends met during her study abroad year. A fourth teaches Japanese to international children in Japan and expresses a need for improved English grammar knowledge. An inquisitive fifth likes to learn about different topics through English. Clearly, these and other students in my class are mature learners with many demands and needs we must attempt to meet in our weekly 70-minute sessions.

Methodology and activities

At the beginning of each NHK term, when my students have settled themselves and we have exchanged greetings, I ask whether they would like to craft their own three-month schedule again. I remind them that the syllabus should reflect their needs and interests and that, afterwards, they will take a vote, “finalizing” the schedule (with changes possible). When new members are present, I emphasize that this is their opportunity, with my aid, to choose activities they think will help them with English skills they want to improve. With their consent, and presumed understanding of our purpose, I group them (better than a teacher vs. whole-class framework) and they generate activities they would like to cover, which I later elicit. Generally patterned upon past class activities, my students make their suggestions, which I write on the board randomly.

Importantly, though I have indeed been fortunate to work with such cooperative NHK students, teachers with students less ready to collaborate, for cultural or other reasons, should adapt this methodology. (Some students within other contexts, for example, might prefer a top-down teacher-initiated curriculum, a desire which must be considered.) Though students certainly should understand they can engage themselves in relevant activities they

like and may need, this paper does not invoke an abdication of the role of the teacher, who should judiciously tailor the process not only to student wishes and participative ability but also to such circumstances as course or institutional objectives. In classes where students seem, for example, to have trouble providing activities, the teacher could write language skills on the board (e.g., speaking), with several related activities (e.g., game, dialog, show-and-tell, or discussion) and encourage students to provide others. Alternatively, a whole repertoire of skill-related activities could be offered, from which the students could make selections. In a course with specific program goals, suggested activities, of course, should be relevant, though many of these are often interpretative, leaving latitude for adaptation. With “Family,” for instance, learners could bring in photographs or devise (or fill in) family trees, describe family (even from prepared paragraphs), or test for vocabulary acquisition.

Next, I write a grid on the board and ask students to fill in the slots next to class sessions with the activities that we have already noted (see below). The students, with my occasional guidance, spread these out to “hit” a variety of skill areas during the term. Again, teachers with less experienced students should supervise the choices to ensure preparation time and variation. As well, those with “shyer” classes can modify this procedure by having their students fill in a similar grid on a handout, which the teacher takes home for final schedule assembly based on majority preferences (and teacher discretion). (There can be more than one activity per slot, especially in classes such as Speaking, in which you may wish to increase tempo and variety.) A final schedule, on which we vote, usually looks like Table 1.

Table 1. Sample class schedule for an NHK class

1 st class	Teacher’s Choice	7 th class	Lecture
2 nd class	New Article	8 th class	Short Story
3 rd class	Debate	9 th class	News Article

4 th class	Grammar	10 th class	Cassette Listening
5 th class	Discussion	11 th class	Presentations
6 th class	Business English	12 th class	Presentations

Most of the activities in Table 1 are self-explanatory and need not detain us in detail. However, a brief explanation might be in order for these choices. The first class of the new term, Teacher's Choice, requires that I prepare an activity. Because students will not have prepared, this is always speaking or listening related. With News Article, students separately bring in English newspaper (or magazine) articles read at home in preparation for in-class group summaries and discussions. For Debate and Discussion, students decide on a topic during a previous class session. For Grammar and Business English, I provide students with handouts well before the class so they can prepare. With Lecture, I speak on a prepared topic. Students take notes and summarize the material afterwards. With Short Story, students read a story I have given them and answer prepared questions. For Cassette Listening, they listen to selections in class, ask and answer questions, then summarize and discuss, depending on time. Finally, for Presentations, students prepare a topic and present it individually in front of the class. These have been lectures, workshops (e.g., *origami*), and quiz-type activities.

Needless to say, some activities in the chart above may be inappropriate for some student populations and in such cases should be modified or replaced with ones more suitable to student needs and wishes. However, with presentations, it is not difficult to imagine a class of diverse students using hobby samples for class presentations. One of my lower-level students once played her violin, much to the delight of the class, who responded in English to her performance; another student brought in a map to describe a trip ["First, I went here. It was a beautiful city. Then, I went there. The mountain was beautiful."]; another brought in a key-ring, explaining the circumstances under which this family heirloom had been passed down to her

from her great-grandmother. Remain practical but flexible with your syllabus.

Issues

Perhaps the biggest concern with successful CN implementation is low student motivation and incredulity at the task, hindering negotiation. That said, in this venture you can coach and coax, but not coerce. Student ideas can still be incorporated into a curriculum more indirectly by eliciting their ideas on paper, having them fill in (rather than discuss) a blank grid such as the one above (which can be used as the departure for a teacher-adjusted class syllabus) or respond to a questionnaire, as Bloor and Bloor (1988) report doing with SL self-access and writing students. (Many students routinely do course-final questionnaires, so why not course-initial ones?) Also, as Clarke (1991) explains, learners can still be involved in this process even if they are restructuring, rather than generating, a syllabus. They can modify components such as tasks, topics, and tests on a teacher-generated syllabus, allowing them some control and giving them a sense of syllabus ownership, which, as Irujo (2000) reminds, is important.

Also, empowering students to determine their syllabus may come with the drawback of their selecting inappropriate materials (e.g., for reading) for themselves or group members when they have been given this responsibility, and absences may be problematic if students designated to prepare group materials miss class. However, teachers who have students select (or prepare) materials should provide guidance. For example, students can be taken to the library where they can learn that graded readers become progressively more challenging (Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, and Macmillan all offer these valuable additions to extensive reading). As well, teachers who have students bring materials for class use should prepare other activities beforehand in case of "no-shows." Anticipate these surprises. Finally, it is important to remember that choosing or creating material is itself part of the collateral learning process, and students can learn about their educational needs and abilities from mistakes.

Finally, in CN, individuals might dominate the process or later contest syllabus choices. As in

any other comparable academic context, however, student self-expression should be encouraged. If this is difficult, their suggestions could be written. As well, learners should be reminded that CN is a democratic activity. Once, well into an NHK term, a student questioned Short Story on this activity day. This student was first reminded that the schedule was a community construct. Then, another student who had always opted for this activity told him very politely but promptly that it was his favorite. The issue was dropped with manifest agreement that the schedule was student-generated for students, and in the first class of the next term they confirmed their desire to negotiate the new schedule and I affirmed their vital place in that process.

Concluding remarks

CN is the pedagogical practice of allowing students to make choices about how and what they will learn. Though this teacher has had to adopt this collaborative exercise for his NHK classes because of institution-specific considerations, the observations made here should be of value to many SL educators in situations in which they are obliged to ensure a meaningful and interesting curriculum for students of disparate interests and language abilities. Certainly, curriculum construction sharing will provide our students the opportunity to make learning choices for which they should be responsible. As such, it is an alternative practice to which to give serious consideration.

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