Reevaluating Syllabus Design

Since 1999, I have run a private language school for young learners, mainly primary school-aged children in Tokyo, Japan. Not many of my students have much motivation or reason to learn English. In general, their parents tell them that they need to study English.

To create a positive environment for my students, I use a student-centered approach and Graves’s (1996) framework for course design. In spite of my attempts, assessing my students’ needs in their language learning has been problematic because they lack metacognitive awareness. In addition, my students have a tendency to depend on the teacher as the sole provider of the knowledge and content of the class.

Therefore, the main source of input for the syllabus design has been the expectations of parents and what I, the teacher, believe the children should learn, rather than students’ preferences. This top-down view of syllabus design has been cited as an obstacle to enhancing learner autonomy in language learning (McDevitt, 2004). It also challenges the claims of those who advocate for a negotiated syllabus intended to encourage active learner participation in decision-making. Active participation in syllabus design has been said to help learners develop their responsibility for learning, motivation, and autonomy (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In this chapter, I reevaluate the top-down nature of syllabus design in my story-based classes for children ages 8–11. I investigated the following questions:

1. How and what aspects of the current syllabus can be negotiated with young learners?
2. What changes does negotiation in the syllabus design bring in a class of young learners?

I begin the chapter with an outline of a story-based syllabus and its objectives followed by a description of how elements of the syllabus were negotiated with students on the 3-month project. Then, I discuss how we addressed obstacles to the negotiated syllabus. The chapter concludes that learners as young as 8 can be “active agents” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 20) in their own learning.
learning in the classroom as they develop decision-making skills through active participation in a syllabus design. An important discovery for teachers of young learners is that syllabus design can be done collaboratively among the teacher and the learners.

**Story-Based Syllabus**
Numerous studies have found social, cognitive, and pedagogical benefits in the story-based approach, such as developing literacy, improving fluency, increasing motivation, stimulating imagination and creativity, and developing social skills (Cameron, 2001; Ellis & Brewster, 1991; Wright, 2008). Accordingly, I have designed a story-based syllabus combining picture books with pre- and poststory activities that match the language level, age, and interests of the children and that are designed to help children improve their English proficiency.

**Negotiated Syllabus Project**
Because of my students’ interest in various stories and their need to develop high literacy skills for their secondary education in Japan, I decided that a story-based approach would be effective in developing their receptive skills, such as reading and listening. Acquiring productive skills, such as speaking, however, requires more voluntary and active involvement by the learners in their own learning (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). In my teaching, I perceived the need to provide more opportunities for the students to take control of their learning. This was my motive to integrate negotiated elements in my story-based classes.

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) define the negotiated syllabus as a “discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how the learning and teaching are to be organized” (p. 5) and suggest four key features to discuss with students: purposes, content, presentation, and evaluation. In my context, however, because of my young learners’ levels of cognitive development, autonomy, and past learning experiences, implementing such negotiation while including all of Breen and Littlejohn’s (2000) four features was impractical. Thus, I partially involved the children in the decision-making process, including them in decisions such as what stories to read and what activities to do.

**Context**
The class for this project was one of my private language school classes. A class meets once a week for 50 minutes per lesson after mainstream school has finished. Classes accommodate learners with diverse ages, motives, and interests, and the class students are assigned to depends on their level of English proficiency and daily schedule.

For this project, I chose a class with more students with reserved behavior to see if providing more active roles for learners would change their behaviors. The class had eight young learners, ages 8–11 (two male third graders, four female third graders, a female second grader, and a female fifth grader). The six female students were beginners and required a lot of teacher support. They hesitated to participate voluntarily in the class unless I allocated turns. The two male students had acquired basic literacy skills over the past 2 years and were comparatively confident in communicating in English, yet they were also naturally reserved.

**Procedure and Results**
During this 3-month project beginning in January 2014, I introduced 12 stories with brief summaries, 10 prestory activities, and 9 poststory activities.
Introducing Students to Decision-Making

In the prestage, I introduced five storybooks with brief summaries to the class. Using a majority rule system, the students selected a book they would all read and five prestory activities to do in the next class. To ensure the voting was democratic and unbiased, the children were asked to vote via raising their hands with their eyes closed.

The action stage consisted of two lessons. In the first lesson, I told the chosen story and conducted four to five prestory activities. The students then selected four to five poststory activities to do in the second lesson, using the same voting system. In the last stage, I evaluated outcomes and recorded them after each lesson as field notes and reflections. I used ideas from these notes in plans for the next lessons. This cycle was repeated five times in this project.

Note that whenever the young learners appeared to be confused and for keywords, phrases, and comprehension questions in storytelling, I used Japanese, the students' native language (L1). The learners were also allowed to use their L1 when they wanted to share their opinions or ask questions above their level of English proficiency.

What Should We Do?

In the first and second lessons, all the learners seemed puzzled and hesitated to participate in the decision-making process. My teaching notes from the early stage of the project (23 January) indicate the issue and my response to the problem:

"Some female students tend to hesitate to express their own preference and waited until they heard other students’ opinions at the beginning. But after I modified the process to a blind vote, all the learners show no hesitation to share their preference by raising their hands, as their eyes are closed."

As a result of the slight modification in the decision-making process, the hesitations learners showed earlier in the project became less apparent by the third lesson. By the fifth lesson, they became accustomed to participating in the decision-making process and did not hesitate to ask questions such as “Mata nani ga iika [Shall I tell you which one is my favorite again?]” or “Futatsu de mo ii? [Can I select two activities?]". At the end of the eighth lesson, five students recommended their own favorite books from the school library (which contains approximately 500 leveled and graded readers) to read for the last class of the project. I considered these voluntary contributions from the children as progress in their decision-making skills.

Increased Student Interaction

It is also important to note that negotiation increased rapport among the students in the class. For example, the young learners started to arrive for class 5–10 minutes earlier and began to discuss their preferences and daily events with each other prior to the start of the lesson. One of the students said that she came to my class earlier because of the pleasure she experienced with her classmates.

The students also frequently asked each other after the decision-making event which stories or activities they had voted for. It was apparent that asking for the young learners’ preferences offered an opportunity for interaction and consequently developed their interest in one another. The change in their behavior was advantageous for facilitating a more humanistic and democratic culture within the class.

Input Into My Syllabus Design

Each negotiation for stories and activities offered me the opportunity to realize the students' needs and wants to ensure a more effective syllabus. They enjoyed stories that have an engaging plot and appealing illustrations yet linguistically challenging lexical items. Thus, it is plausible that
the congeniality of the story is more important than its linguistic simplicity. As far as the activities are concerned, the Key Word game (Ellis & Brewster, 1991) for prestory activities and Whisper Relay (see Appendix A) for poststory activities were most popular among students over several lessons. However, the popularity of games also differed depending on the story. For instance, Front Cover (Wright, 2008) became the most popular prestory activity in the fifth lesson, but was the least popular by the seventh lesson. For the poststory activity, Quiz 5 (see Appendix A) was the most popular in the fourth lesson but was the least popular by the sixth lesson. Thus, playfulness and applicability of the activity to the story might be the keys to offering more engaging and effective activities.

In summary, from my perspective, the project achieved improved learner decision-making skills, better student rapport, a more democratic class culture, and more teacher resources for creating a learner-initiated syllabus.

The Learners’ Voices

On 20 March 2014, at the end of the last lesson of the project, I asked the class to take part in postproject interviews. I recorded the interviews using Quick Voice, an iPad app. While students were engaged in a writing task, I asked each student to come to my desk individually to ensure the privacy of the interviewees.

Developing Learner Autonomy

I asked about the participants’ preferences in school subjects and other classes to discover their general interests. Seven out of eight participants were enthusiastic about all the lessons they took, such as piano and Japanese calligraphy, including English lessons. The lessons were diverse, but the reasons were similar, such as

“Omoshiroi kara suki [I like them all because they are all fun],”

and

“Ikuno ga tanoshimi dakara [Because I look forward to going all the classes].”

In the interview, one male student who had asked his mother to send him to my class eagerly expressed his pleasure reading a book he borrowed from the class library. I asked if he would like to recommend the book for reading and activities in class. He answered, with a beaming smile, a definite “Yes.” In addition, two enthusiastic students who started self-study reading sessions before the class commented that they started and continued the sessions because they wanted to. The enthusiasm of the learners supports the claim of researchers that involving the learners in the decision-making process enables them to take responsibility for their learning and can lead to autonomous learning (Boon, 2005; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

The enthusiasm expressed in the interview had been apparent during the project, especially when the children were deciding the contents of the next class and as they developed familiarity with the voting system. In fact, when I asked them to recommend a story for the last lesson of the project, five students recommended five different books to read, which included the books they had recently read from the reading library and recorded as homework. I recall with pleasure that it was challenging to understand what they said because all of them shouted the names of their recommended books simultaneously, and this was followed by uncontrollable giggles. In contrast to the hesitation that the children had showed in the earlier stage of the project, this incident shows a significant difference in the enthusiasm of the learners to be involved in the decision-making process for the class content.
Uncovering Learner Preferences

In the interviews, I inquired about the participants’ favorite activities and stories from class; I also asked why they chose these to investigate their needs, motivation, and attitudes toward learning English. The most popular book among the students was *The Odd Egg* (Gravett, 2009), which was not the easiest story for them to comprehend linguistically. However, students explained that they liked the story because it was exciting and had an unexpected ending. Whisper Relay (Appendix A) was the most popular activity because of its playfulness and collaborative nature; students said “Minna de asobete omoshiroi [It is fun because I can play it with everyone].”

We used each story listed in Table 1 over a period of two lessons. In each of the first lessons in which a new book was introduced (Lessons 1, 3, 5, 7, 9), we did prestory activities and voted for the best activity. In the second lesson for each new book (Lessons 2, 4, 6, 8, 10), we did poststory activities and voted for the best activity. For a list of the stories and the corresponding most popular activities for each story, see Table 1 (see Appendix A for activities).

In response to a question that asked for their recommendation for the next semester, one student suggested that we should read some books that were easy and interesting to read along with other students because it was fun to do so. Another student recommended reading *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) because it was her favorite book and she would like to read it in English with her classmates. One other student did not list a specific title but asked to read “something interesting.” Such responses to open questions reflect the young learners’ genuine interest in the stories and desire to contribute their ideas in developing their own learning process. This is an important step toward learner autonomy (Nikolov, 2000).

### TABLE 1. LIST OF SELECTED STORIES AND ACTIVITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LESSON</th>
<th>STORY</th>
<th>MOST POPULAR PRE- AND POSTSTORY ACTIVITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Diary of a Wombat</em> (French, 2002)</td>
<td>Key Word Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Diary of a Wombat</em></td>
<td>Draw and Guess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>The Big Carrot</em> (Hawes &amp; Trotter, 2011)</td>
<td>Key Word Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>The Big Carrot</em></td>
<td>Quiz 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>The Odd Egg</em> (Gravett, 2009)</td>
<td>Front Cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>The Odd Egg</em></td>
<td>Whisper Relay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Yoko</em> (Wells, 1988)</td>
<td>Key Word Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Yoko</em></td>
<td>Whisper Relay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>The Pet Shop</em> (Hunt &amp; Brychta, 1995)</td>
<td>Key Word Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>The Pet Shop</em></td>
<td>Whisper Relay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

There are two primary disadvantages of a negotiated syllabus: learner reluctance to accept responsibility for their own learning and the excessive time and workload that is required of teachers (Nation & Macalister, 2010; Tran, 2011). Such learner reluctance was evident at the beginning of the project; however, more active engagement from the children in the decision-making process occurred as they grew accustomed to it. This outcome suggests that learner reluctance can be overcome through decision-making practices and students’ pleasurable experiences in taking control of their own learning. Teacher preparation time and workload can also be reduced by implementing only partial negotiation, as I have done in this project.

The advantages of course negotiations found in this project, such as cultivating learner autonomy and inspiring motivation in student language learning, are consistent with the literature (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Nation & Macalister, 2010). The project’s most evident advantages were the development of learners’ decision-making skills, increased rapport among students, a democratic culture within the class, and more reliable information for me to use in the syllabus design.

Conclusion

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) claim negotiations in a language class cultivate responsibility, motivation, and autonomy in learners. This short project investigated how teachers can integrate a negotiated, learner-centered approach into story-based classes for young learners. Because of the short time period of the project, the extent of the changes in the students’ responsibility, motivation, and learning autonomy was difficult to ascertain. Throughout the project, however, the children’s decision-making skills developed and they participated in determining the contents of their class more actively and enthusiastically. Therefore, I argue that learners as young as 8 can be “active agents” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 20) in their own learning in the classroom with a teacher’s support. Above all, because of the negotiation process, I was able to identify the young learners’ needs and wants. These insights can be applied to class content and teaching, making the syllabus design a more collaborative process than a solitary teacher labor.

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References


Additional Resources


Appendix A: Storytelling Activities

Most of the activities used for both the pre- and poststory phases are taken from Wright (2008) and Ellis and Brewster (1991). Here are procedures for the most popular activities, shown in Table 1.

Prestorytelling Activities

1. **Key Word Game** (Ellis & Brewster, 1991)
   1. Show children five to eight key words from the story.
   2. Put children in pairs and have them sit facing each other.
   3. Put something, such as a pencil or an eraser, between each pair.
   4. Read the story to the children.
   5. Ask children to pick up the object as fast as possible when they hear one of the key words announced.
   6. The child who picks up the object first gets a point. The winners are the children in each pair with the most points.

**Front Cover (Wright, 2008)**

1. Show the front cover of the book.
2. Ask the children to explain what kind of story they think it will be based on the picture.
Poststorytelling Activities

*Draw and Guess* (Wright, 2008)

1. Have the children listen to the story again.
2. Ask them to draw a picture from the book.
3. Show the drawing to the class and ask them to guess which part of the story the picture is depicting.

*Quiz 5* (author’s original activity)

1. Ask the children five comprehension questions about the story. (E.g., Who’s in the story? What happens at the beginning of the story?)
2. For each question, select volunteers to answer. The student who gets the correct answer is awarded with one point.
3. At the end of the activity, share the total score and applaud the winner.

*Whisper Relay* (author’s original activity)

1. List some of the key sentences in the story.
2. Ask the children to line up.
3. Whisper one of the sentences to the first player, who “passes” it to the next player by whispering. Continue passing the sentence to the end of the line.
4. Ask the last player the sentence he or she heard to see how close it is to the original.