

An Investigation Into the Appropriateness of a Procedural Negotiated Syllabus for Adult Vocational Learners

Mohammad A. Assaf

English Department, Emirates Schools Establishment, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Mohammad I. Zabadi

English Foundation Unit, Gulf University for Science and Technology, Mishref, Kuwait

Emad A. S. Abu-Ayyash

Faculty of Education, The British University in Dubai, Dubai, UAE

Abstract—The present mixed-methods study investigated the readiness of teachers and adult learners at a vocational centre in the United Arab Emirates to implement a negotiated English syllabus. The study addressed two main questions: 1) are teachers and learners at the Vocational Training Centre ready to implement a negotiated syllabus? And 2) does the negotiated syllabus implementation lead to improvement in learners' motivation? Results showed the significant potential of a negotiated syllabus in enhancing learners' motivation by making them part of the decision-makers' circle regarding the components of an intended English syllabus. On the other hand, learners, teachers and management systems face challenges that must first be overcome to succeed in implementing negotiated syllabi. The findings of this study support the value of involving learners in classroom decisions, which is expected to make them feel responsible for their learning.

Index Terms—motivation, negotiated syllabus, syllabus, vocational learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Negotiating classroom decisions, with regard to the components of an intended English syllabus, with learners may enhance their motivation to develop academically and personally. Discussing this claim requires exploring the issue of empowering learners to be active participants in classroom decision-making. Thus, it is essential to identify a syllabus that ensures learners' involvement in making decisions about what, when, why and how they are taught (Peyvandi et al., 2019). It is equally significant to account for the learners' various needs as a reference point in designing that kind of syllabus.

The English department at the Vocational Training Center (VTC), United Arab Emirates, has tried different product-based syllabi. However, results have not met the benchmarks defined by the VTC. The centre caters to those students who are disengaged from mainstream education through an alternative program of a vocational nature. It aims to meet the needs of the business market. The VTC follows the Australian competency-based framework implemented by Australia's leading vocational education and training provider, Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Thus, the VTC places an emphasis on what a person is able to do in the workplace, rather than what they know (Abu-Ayyash & Assaf, 2016; Hill et al., 2011). The present mixed-methods study investigated the readiness of teachers and learners to implement a negotiated syllabus (NS) at VTC. This research paper addressed two main questions: 1) Are teachers and learners at the VTC ready to implement a negotiated syllabus? and 2) Does the negotiated syllabus implementation lead to improvement in learners' motivation?

A. Statement of the Problem

The selected textbook, considered as syllabus, is VENTURES, which is cyclical since the same themes appear in the different series. Learners have nine periods (40 minutes each) of English every week. The Key English Test (KET) is the benchmark to graduate from the VTC. Learners are expected to be at the level of "A1" according to the European Common Framework of Reference (CEFR). Despite the efforts exerted in teaching English since the establishment of the VTC in 2007, learners show no quantifiable improvement as demonstrated by final exam results, KET scores or teachers' remarks. The limited English level of learners affects their chance to advance in their studies and work. This issue, therefore, is a cry for English teachers to take a stance on how to design a syllabus that can motivate demotivated and disengaged adult learners to enable them to pass the KET.

B. Purpose and Research Questions

The study aimed to provide the English teachers at the VTC with a real opportunity to explore the possibilities and

effectiveness of implementing an NS. It was hoped that they will embark on a discussion that helps to engage other teachers and syllabus designers at the VTC to design a plan to implement an NS if it is found to be appropriate and effective. Specifically, this study forwarded two research questions: 1) Are teachers and learners at the VTC ready to implement a negotiated syllabus? and 2) Does the negotiated syllabus implementation lead to improvement in learners' motivation?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Adult Education

An adult is defined according to his/her role in the society and his/her understanding of responsibility towards learning (Knowles, 1980; Ayish & Deveci, 2019). This definition matches with the definition given to adult education by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982, p. 9) as “a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills”. UNESCO (2016) adopted a more comprehensive definition of adult learning and education (ALE) that considers most definitions. ALE is defined to incorporate all “formal, non-formal and informal or incidental learning and continuing education (both general and vocational, and both theoretical and practical) undertaken by adults” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 28). In brief, these definitions offer a framework that shows what and how adults learn.

Although Knowles' definition is meant to be inclusive for any adult, many UAE's adults do not share all of its features. Due to the high economic standards of many adults in the United Arab Emirates, their understanding of responsibility differs from adults in western and developing countries. However, adult learners at the VTC consider themselves responsible citizens since they leave their families and spend weeks and sometimes months away from their homes for training purposes. Studying in a boarding centre entails being responsible for some daily routines that are usually done by drivers, maids, and siblings.

B. Adult Learning Theories

Elias and Merriam (2005) compare seven adult education philosophies: Liberal, progressive, behaviourist, humanist, radical/critical, analytic, and postmodern. It is unclear if the 250 teaching and administrative staff at the VCT hold a common philosophy due to the staff's different nationalities and educational backgrounds. This situation is beneficial because it enriches the staff's experience through creating an environment which encourages sharing and the negotiation of ideas. A mixture of radical, progressive and humanistic philosophy exists, but a humanistic/constructive view is dominant. This view supposes that a highly motivated and self-directed learner assumes responsibility and self-development, whereas teachers are seen more as facilitators in a co-learning process.

The theory of andragogy highlights the belief that adults are quite different from school children. Knowles (1980, p. 27) states that “the primary and immediate mission of every adult educator is to help individuals satisfy their needs and achieve their goals”. Thus, an effective teacher has the skills to recognise and meet learners' desires (Jarvis, 2010; Sieglöva, 2019). The principles and conditions of adult learning and teaching proposed by Knowles (1980) have been proposed and recommended by TAFE. Furthermore, TAFE and other universities in Australia employ an updated version of principles:

1. Adults need some kind of respect and safety (physically and emotionally).
2. Adults can and will utilise their senses to learn.
3. Adults learn more efficiently when they can apply new information to their existing perception.
4. Adults should practice recently learned skills and implement first-hand knowledge.
5. Adults best recollect the beginning and end of a learning session.
6. Adults can verify their own accomplishments when they receive feedback on their work.
7. Adults need to be actively involved in the learning process. (Hill et al., 2011, p. 93).

This study considers the seventh principle to be a turning point in helping teachers and learners to implement an NS because it empowers learners to make decisions about intended syllabi.

C. Satisfying Learners' Needs

The satisfaction of one's needs has been emphasised by several scholarly investigations. Sullo (2009, p. 38), argues that human beings try to achieve the following established basic needs: to survive and be safe and secure, to connect and belong, to gain power and autonomy, and to play, enjoy and have fun. On the other hand, Maslow's theory of self-actualisation stresses that even if all the primary or physiological needs are satisfied, “we may often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for” (Stephens, 2000, p. 261). Consequently, adults, who like to take control of their own learning (Loeng, 2020), generally become involved in what they do well, hence they like to re-do it, and put in more effort (Littlejohn, 2001).

D. Demotivated Learners and Negotiated Syllabus

McCall (2003, p. 113) indicates a number of characteristics of disengaged learners, which can be used to describe the learners at the VTC: behavioural dysfunction, need for academic remediation, social dysfunction, family conflict and

chronic absenteeism. In addition, learners at the VTC lack the skill of self-regulation, defined as “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are oriented to attaining goals” (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). Since self-regulated learners “monitor their behaviour in terms of their goals and self-reflect on their increasing effectiveness ... [it is expected that] [t]his enhances their self-satisfaction and motivation to continue to improve their methods of learning” (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 66).

Ma and Gao (2010) studied the effect of an NS on promoting students' autonomy in Dalian University of Technology, China. They found that “negotiation of purposes, content, ways of working and evaluation [enable] students [to] become highly motivated and wholeheartedly involved and take on greater responsibility for their own learning” (p. 901). Further, Tuan (2011, p. 13) studied whether “task negotiation could accommodate students' learning needs and increase their learning effectiveness”. He came to the conclusion that task negotiation enhances learners' motivation, involvement, and achievement. Similarly, Pakdaman et al. (2022) concluded: “that using a negotiated syllabus can filter language anxiety and significantly improve students' motivation for learning” (p. 35).

Another evidence comes from the action research study by Dalby (2010), who investigated the impact of a process syllabus on increasing “self-perceived student level, student use of learning strategies, and students' course satisfaction” (p. 10). The study indicated that the majority of students expressed position opinions about the motivating outcome of negotiating.

E. Types of Syllabi

The literature on syllabus design draws a broad distinction between two contrasting types: product-based and process-based. Nunan (1988) and White (1988) categorise syllabi into two forms: product/synthetic/type “A” vs. process/analytic/type “B” respectively. According to Wette (2011), a product syllabus is developed externally, and teachers have to follow it, while a process is one that “results from explicit negotiations with learners about their needs and wishes” (p. 137).

F. What Is a Negotiated Syllabus?

In the context of learning, negotiation has something to do with “the discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organised” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 1). Negotiated syllabi are also called “process syllabi” which consider the questions of “who does what with whom, or what subject matter, with what resources, when, how, and for what learning purpose (s)” (Breen, 1984, p. 56). That is to say, the process model relies on learner wishes, goals and improvement processes (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) identify three types of negotiation: personal, collaborative and procedural. The former occurs when people use a complex mental process to understand what they read or hear and be understood. On the other hand, interactive negotiation occurs when people express their understanding or when they fail to get the point of a particular conversational interaction. The “primary focus of procedural negotiation is less upon meaning than upon reaching agreement” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 9). They highlight that “the primary purpose of procedural negotiation is managing teaching and learning as a group experience” (p. 8). The outcomes of a procedural negotiation explain the nature of a process syllabus which is the cornerstone of any NS or curriculum.

The concept of negotiation is evident in the emergence of four strands: humanistic and open language teaching, learning stratagem research, learner independence and syllabus negotiation (Tudor, 1996). These strands emphasise the centrality of learners in the “language-learning process and the learner's affective, cognitive and linguistic needs should all play a role in determining the content and implementation of whatever syllabus type is decided upon.” (Clarke, 1991, p. 16). Similarly, Nunan (1988, p. 20) asserts that “humanistic education [...] reflects the notion that education should be concerned with the development of autonomy in the learner”. Nunan's assertion shows that the VCT has the capability of implementing an NS since many teachers at the VCT believe in the effectiveness of humanistic education.

Breen and Littlejohn (2000) list seven situations where an NS is possible: teachers and learners have different backgrounds, course duration is short, a need to find common ground among diverse learners, a needs analysis is not likely, no main textbook, learners' past experiences is a reference point, and an open-ended and exploratory course. Although these situations are important, the readiness of learners, teachers and the management system to implement an NS are decisive factors. What do learners and teachers need if we want them to be part of a negotiated cycle? Is the management system ready to empower teachers and syllabus designers to make critical decisions concerning syllabus design? Are syllabus designers well qualified to make the necessary changes to implement an NS? Positive answers to these questions seem to outweigh the importance of the seven listed situations.

G. Negotiated Classroom Decisions

The range of decisions subject to negotiation is “any and all decisions that need to be made in the ongoing creation of the language curriculum of a particular class or group of learners” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 30). Teachers and learners work together to reach an agreement on four aspects of the curriculum: purpose(s), content, methods, and evaluation. According to Breen and Littlejohn (2000, p. 31), seeking an agreement on these four aspects can be achieved through negotiating the following questions: Why are we learning the language? What should be the focus of our work? How should the learning work be carried out? And how well has the learning proceeded?

Meanwhile, asking and answering the four questions has to be seen as part of a cycle that facilitates future decisions.

The negotiation cycle indicates three steps that describe its sequence. At step 1, teachers and learners negotiate the four questions and jointly make decisions. At step 2, decisions are acted upon, and a number of actions take place in order to form the practical experience of the learners. At step 3, the outcomes of the actions are evaluated by teachers and learners.

Involving learners in classroom decision making (henceforth DM) has to be gradual. Breen and Littlejohn (2000, p. 286) illustrate what they call the “curriculum pyramid”, which includes six levels as shown in Figure 1.

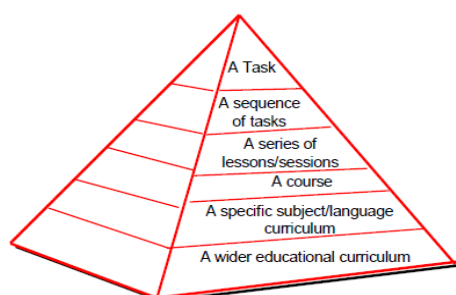


Figure 1: The Curriculum Pyramid: Levels of Focus

These levels include immediate, moment-by-moment decisions (tasks), what to teach (syllabus) and what and how learners will learn (language curriculum).

To sum up, the negotiation cycle illustrates the four areas subject to negotiation and the curriculum pyramid, which shows the seven progressive levels to which the cycle can be applied, and offers a framework for a process syllabus. Figure 2 summarises the structure of a process syllabus.

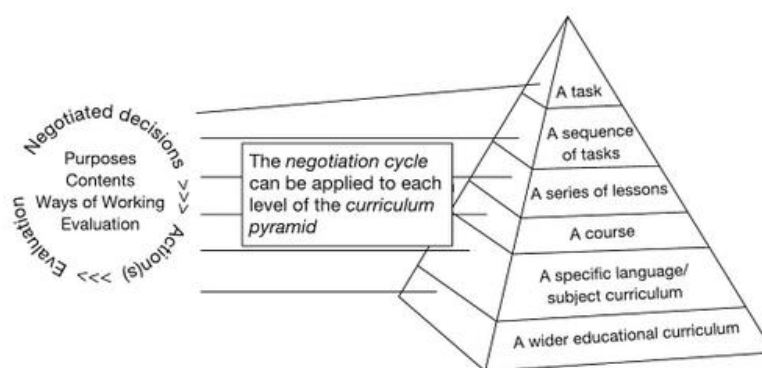


Figure 2: A Process Syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, p. 287)

H. Arguments for Procedural Negotiation

The case for employing a procedural negotiated syllabus is supported by a considerable number of references and studies. For instance, Breen and Littlejohn (2000, pp. 19-29) identify six advantages of an NS:

1. It is a means for responsible membership of the classroom community;
2. It can construct and reflect learning as an emancipatory process;
3. It can activate the socio-cultural means of the classroom group;
4. It enables learners to exercise their active agency in learning;
5. It can enrich the classroom as a resource for language learning;
6. It can inform and extend the teacher's pedagogic strategies

Additionally, Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 156) emphasise that an NS responds to learners' needs, enhances motivation, creates meaning-focused activities, and develops learners' awareness of language-learning activities. Similarly, Kaplan & Renard (2015) highlight the effectiveness of engaging learners in the process of two-way learning through negotiating the syllabus to increase their “commitment and motivation to fulfil its components” (p. 419). Furthermore, Ansary and Babaii (2002) emphasise the importance of negotiation since it facilitates the process of finding a textbook that responds to the different needs of learners.

I. Factors for Successful Implementation of an NS

Like all other types of syllabi, the negotiated syllabus has its own limitations. White (1988) considers a process syllabus as a utopian proposal, causing problems for those who want to implement it in the world of everyday affairs. White (1988, pp. 101-102) suggests considering the following constraints:

1. A lack of formal evaluation in practice;

2. Demands a high level of competent teachers;
3. Inadequate provisions for relating the syllabus to its context;
4. Redefinition of power and authority in the classroom would be culturally inappropriate in some societies;
5. The need for a supply of materials and learning resources if a single textbook is not used;
6. The focus on procedures rather than on results may constrain learners' achievement of intended goals.

Long and Crookes (1992) list four drawbacks of an NS: language form is not addressed, lack of a theoretical reference or research in SLA, arbitrary selection of tasks without prior needs identification, and the absence of clear criteria for grading and sequencing tasks. Additionally, Nation and Macalister (2010) talk about two types of disadvantages. The first results from a lack of knowledge or experience with this type of syllabi. The second is that implementing a fully negotiated syllabus requires teachers that are highly skilled in syllabus design and producing resources. They mention the following disadvantages as examples of the two types: learners' reluctance to negotiate, learners' ignorance of the range of options they could choose from, teachers' fear of loss of power and status, and difficulty in reaching an agreement with ill-behaved learners.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

Given the purpose of this study, which is to explore the possibility of implementing an NS at the VTC, the use of a mixed-methods descriptive single-case study method is the most appropriate methodology because describing teachers' views involves the collection of extensive data in order to gain insights into phenomena of interest (Gay, 1996, p. 11). Equally, the researchers collected numerical data in order to further explain the learners' responses.

B. Sampling

By using a table of random numbers, fifty male learners (25%) were selected as a sample to represent 200 learners at the VCT. The average age of the sample is 19 years. The majority of learners (90%) were beginners with six years of school study at state schools. Around 50% were without formal education for three years before joining VCT. In addition, three male English teachers: Ali, Ahmad and Khaled (Aliases), who teach English to all learners at the VCT, were interviewed. They were recruited from different countries to enrich the cultural experience of learners. They are from Egypt (MA in TESOL), Iraq (MA student in TESOL) and South Africa (BA in English). Two of them have been teaching English for more than twenty years while the third one has ten years of experience.

C. Data Collection and Instruments

The data were collected at the VTC where learners were studying. An interview and a survey questionnaire were employed to collect teachers and students' views on implementing an NS. A brief description of how the researchers collected the data is discussed in the next sections.

(a). Teachers' Interview

The three teachers attended a 90-minute session to be familiar with an NS (definition, model, outcomes and challenges). Prior to asking the focus group (Ali, Ahmad and Khaled) to answer the question, three teachers of English from another department at VCT were asked to answer a set of open-ended questions for piloting purposes. They suggested that some changes be made in order to make the questions clearer and to aid in answering the main questions of the paper. The interview agenda consisted of the following questions:

1. Are the conditions at VTC appropriate for implementing an NS? Explain.
2. What are the potential advantages of an NS?
3. What are the potential disadvantages of implementing an NS?
4. Would you suggest that other teachers implement an NS in other subjects? Why?
5. Have you got any recommendations related to the implementation of an NS?

The interviewees asked for a copy of the interview questions to discuss them before the real interview. They were happy with the questions, and they did not have any comments on them. Then, one of the researchers interviewed them as one group to "produce more legitimate claims to the validity or credibility of data" (Hobson & Townsend, 2010, p. 234). They took part in a 60-minute semi-structured interview by answering open-ended questions.

(b). Learners' Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the study was adapted from Nunan (1988) and derived from the literature review of the proposed process model of an NS (see Appendix A). It aimed to explore learners' opinions about learning English and towards implementing an NS. After piloting the questionnaire with three learners, the researchers made the necessary changes. The questionnaire contained a combination of Likert-type scale and true/false questions. Specifically, five areas of research questions are addressed: (1) reasons for learning English; (2) methodological preferences; (3) learning thinking skills; (4) learners' involvement; and (5) motivation and negotiation. The learners were assured of the anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses by completing a consent form.

D. Data Analysis

After data collection, the qualitative and quantitative data were analysed separately. Data from teachers' interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The focus of the questionnaire was on collecting descriptive data through quantitative data to get a clear picture of the learners' perceptions. Therefore, descriptive statistics were used to represent and discuss the learners' responses. The results of the questionnaire are depicted as tables and charts.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Learners' Responses

To explore the learners' attitudes and opinions about learning English, fifty questionnaires were distributed to learners, of which, a total of forty (80%) were completed and returned. Learners' responses to the questionnaire are provided below.

Part I: Reasons for learning English

Fifty percent of the learners did not mention any reason for learning English. In other words, they did not want to learn English because they think they can get a job in the army without a good command of English language. Of course, there are other possible reasons, mainly negative attitudes towards learning English because of issues related to the school environment, teachers, syllabus, etc. The rest of the responses fall into four categories: enjoyment (20%), communication (12.5%), employment (5%) and social needs (12.5%) as shown in Figure 3.

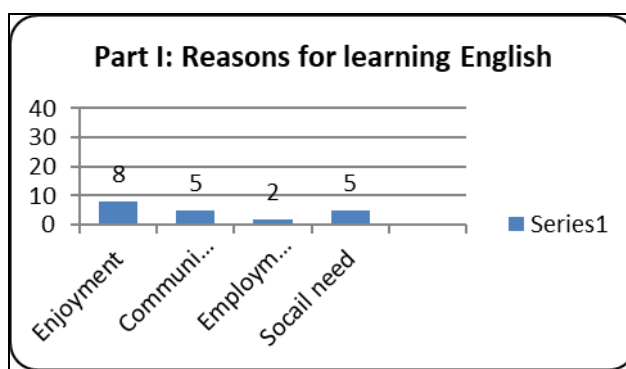


Figure 3 Question 1: Why Do You Learn/Want to Learn English?

The responses indicate that learners do not place any value in learning English for academic purposes. Teachers need to identify the learners' needs and interests as illustrated by Knowles (1980, p. 27) who states that "the primary and immediate mission of every adult educator [one educates adults] is to help individuals satisfy their needs". Thus, syllabus designers at the VCT need to include the learners' four areas of interest in the syllabus.

Part II: Methodological Preferences

Figure 4 shows that learners prefer learning individually to being in one large group. Eighteen learners favour learning in a small group while twenty-six learners strongly disagree to work in pairs. In addition, the thirty-five learners who were neutral (N) in their replies said that their neutral replies were due to their belief that all learning\teaching patterns yield the same results.

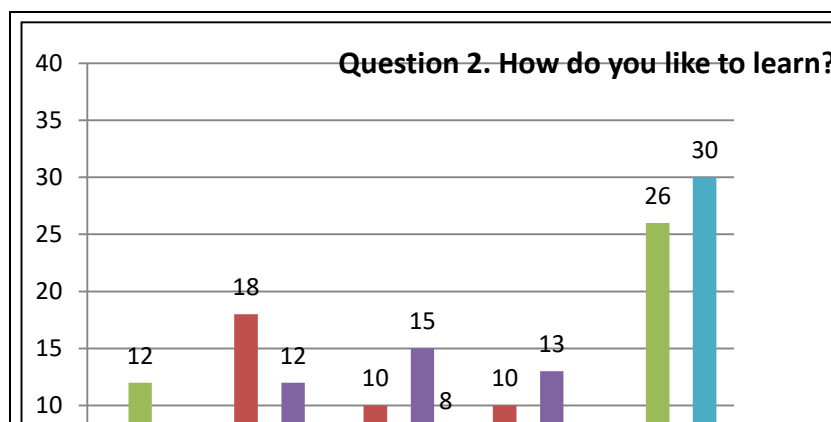


Figure 4 How Do You Like to Learn?

It is likely that learners fear being unsuccessful when they work in pairs or groups. They think that working alone may help them to achieve a sense of "self-actualization" as affirmed by Maslow.

Part III: Content

All of the learners feel a need to learn thinking skills as shown in Figure (5).

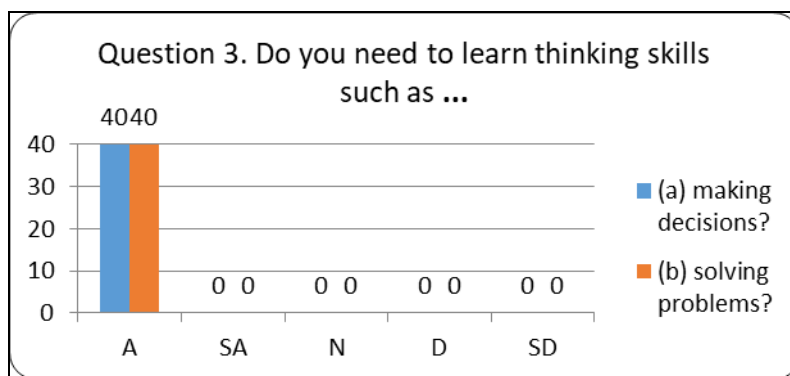


Figure 5. Do You Need to Learn Thinking Skills Such as DM and PS?

All learners are interested in learning how to solve problems and to make sound decisions. Mastering these skills is of primary significance for them since they experience social and academic problems. In addition, this interest is helpful for teachers to involve learners in DM about their learning.

Part IV: Negotiated decisions

Figure 6 shows that 100% of learners agree to be involved in DM on the methods of teaching. The same percentage of learners think that they need to take part in their assessment. Thirty-seven learners are keen on defining the purposes of learning English at the VCT. Some disagreement exists regarding their involvement in DM about the content of the syllabus. Twenty-five (62.5%) learners agree to play a role in selecting the content while eight are neutral and seven oppose giving learners any role in selecting the themes of the syllabus.

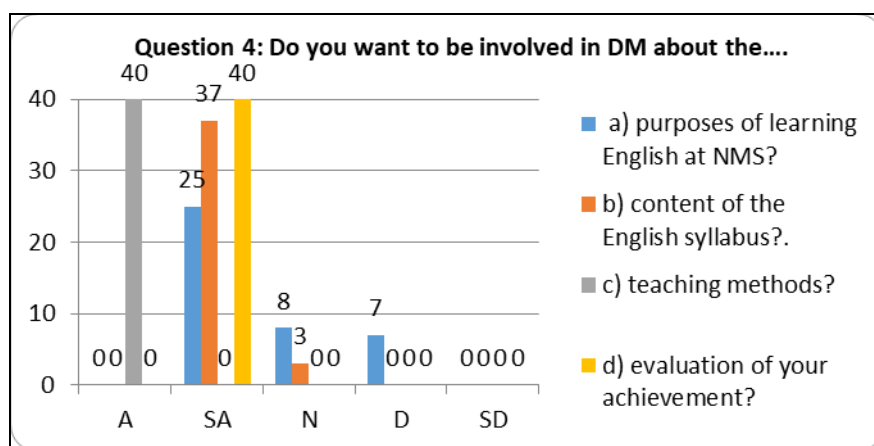


Figure 6. Do You Want to be Involved in DM About Learning English?

Learners are keen on having a role in DM about their learning since they see themselves as independent entities. This interest in having a say in their education matches Nunan's (1988) belief that humanistic education should help learners develop their autonomy.

Part V: Open questions (Questions 5 & 6)

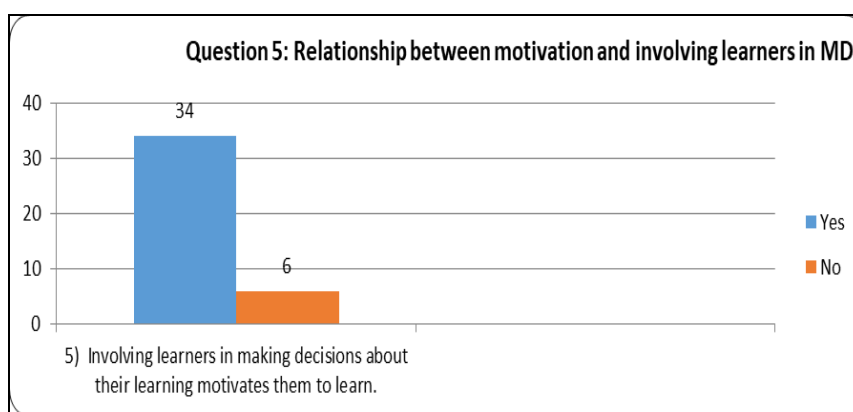


Figure 7. Relationship Between Motivation and Learner Involvement in MD

Thirty-four learners (85%) agree that making decisions about their learning motivates them to learn English while

15% stated they do not share this opinion without giving any justifications. Those who said “yes” gave a set of common justifications. Being part of the decision-making process makes them feel that they are respected and esteemed. In addition, they think that they can voice their concerns, interests and dreams. Finally, they will be motivated to learn what they choose rather than things imposed on them. These justifications agree with a study by Ma and Gao (2010), which shows that negotiation of purposes, contents, ways of working and evaluation enhances learners’ motivation.

In answering question six, 25 learners believe that an NS is suitable for the VTC (Figure 8). They think that adults need to be responsible for their learning. Furthermore, they will get rid of written tasks and exams which they dislike. Also, they will choose what suits their needs as adults who only want to be trained to get a job, for example, weapons, military principles, internet and communication. Five learners think that they can reduce the time of teaching because they are good at arguing for the sake of argument. It is worth noting not to think of negotiation as a bargaining process by teachers and learners; on the contrary, it entails cooperation and teamwork spirit to reach an agreement.

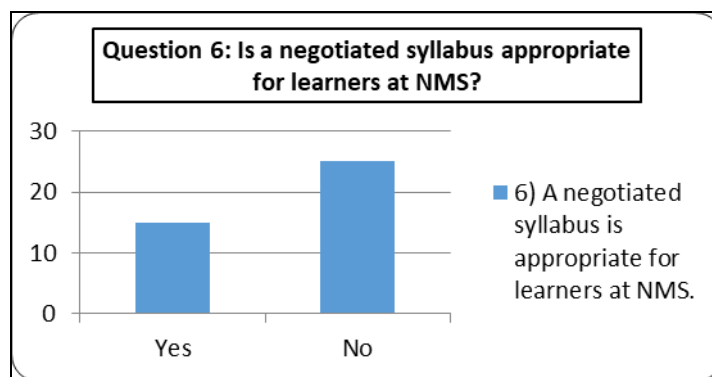


Figure 8. Appropriateness of NS for NMC

Conversely, 15 learners think that only teachers are qualified to choose what suits learners. Furthermore, since the majority of learners are low achievers, they will tend to choose very simple tasks which will not develop their language. Moreover, it is likely that it will be difficult to reach an agreement because learners have different and negative opinions about learning.

These responses show that learners are aware of the conditions for implementing an NS. They highlight the importance of motivation by involving learners in their learning. They believe that learners have a central role in helping teachers to implement new ideas. Besides, it is important for learners to be responsible for their learning by being part of the learning process. As adults, they need to control their learning rather than feel manipulated by someone else’s demands (Loeng, 2020).

B. Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Teachers’ Interviews

Question: 1. Are the conditions at the NMC appropriate for implementing an NS?

According to Mr. Khaled, the conditions are to some extent appropriate because of demotivated and careless learners’ low level of English, a top-down management system, and overloaded teachers. Conversely, Mr. Ali and Mr. Ahmad think that conditions are suitable because of qualified teachers, rich resources, the different backgrounds of teachers and learners, and absence of needs analysis. They think that since learners are adults, they do not support the learning of material imposed on them. Thus, negotiating the components of an intended syllabus with learners is a must. On the other hand, they think it would be problematic to implement an NS due to lack of adequate training in thinking skills for teachers and learners, the absence of a negotiation culture, different teaching methods, and lack of communication between teachers and syllabus designers.

Obviously, the VTC is not the ideal environment to implement an NS, although most of the conditions defined by Breen and Littlejohn (2000) exist. Demotivated learners, heavy teaching loads and hierarchical management system are barriers. On the other hand, it is recommended to try an NS gradually with advanced learners as highlighted in a study by Shamami (2010) who concluded that an NS is not effective with intermediate students.

Questions: 2&3. What are the most potential advantages and disadvantages of NS?

The teachers distinguish between advantages for teachers and learners. Teachers will have a good opportunity to develop their teaching and research practices by studying different syllabi to justify their choice of an NS. Negotiating with learners requires strong communication skills which can create a friendly environment in the classroom. Another advantage is promoting learning and practising productive thinking skills: DM and problem solving (PS). Finally, avoiding the drawbacks of using just a single textbook by considering other available resources is expected since no single textbook can meet the needs of all learners due to individual differences among learners.

On the other hand, a number of possible drawbacks of an NS were outlined. A high percentage of learners may not cooperate with the teachers. Some of them may be reluctant to negotiate their learning with teachers because they are careless. A second issue relates to the extra work required by teachers and administrative staff to acquaint themselves with this new syllabus. It is likely they prefer using current textbooks to be involved with reluctant learners in a long

journey of negotiation. Mr. Ahmad pointed out that only a few remarkable teachers can implement such an “ideal syllabus.” On the other hand, Mr. Ali believed that it is difficult to reach an agreement with curriculum and assessment units because they believe in standardised tests and ready-made syllabi to ensure fair assessment for all learners in different departments. Mr. Khaled envisaged behavioural problems if learners are given more freedom to negotiate their learning, “learners will dominate us” he said.

The teachers’ responses reflect the main advantages mentioned by Breen and Littlejohn (2000), Ansary and Babaii (2002), Dalby (2010), Nation and Macalister (2010), Ma and Gao (2010) and Tuan (2011). Examples include: motivating learners, enhancing academic achievement, reflecting learning as an emancipatory process, and enabling learners to be responsible for their learning. Similarly, the highlighted disadvantages match with what is mentioned in the literature review especially by White (1988) and Nation and Macalister (2010).

Question 4. Would you suggest that other teachers implement NS in other subjects? Why?

The teachers gave a conditional agreement to implement an NS. Mr. Ali agreed to try it with high-level learners who are interested in learning English and can communicate in English. He also asked for “semi-negotiated syllabus” where learners and teachers make decisions about content and teaching methods. Mr. Khaled called for “part-negotiated syllabus” with intermediate and high-level learners regarding the content where learners choose from a set of themes. On the other hand, Mr. Ahmad suggested “semi-structured negotiated syllabus” where learners make decisions about evaluation and content by choosing from a set of alternatives. They are against implementing a complete NS as suggested by Breen and Littlejohn (2000) because some conditions are not suitable, especially the level of learners and the top-down management system.

The teachers’ conditioned agreement to implement an NS harmonises with concerns by writers like White (1988), Clarke (1991), and Long and Crooker (1992). Nevertheless, it has two significant advantages: motivating learners and enhancing their sense of ownership. Ensuring that learners possess these two characteristics may solve many academic and social problems for these learners and the VTC.

Question 5: Recommendations

The interviewed teachers had the following recommendations:

1. Conducting action research to evaluate the best approach to implement an NS;
2. PD sessions on designing an NS for all subjects;
3. Training learners in PS, DM and negotiation;
4. Piloting with one class by each teacher;
5. Gradual implementation of an NS;
6. Implementing an NS first by the Arabic and Islamic teachers to overcome the language barrier; and
7. Spreading a culture of negotiation at VTC.

Implementing the suggested recommendations can help in overcoming many of the constraints of an NS. Providing teachers and learners with appropriate training in critical thinking skills and communication skills, especially negotiation is critical to a successful implementation of an NS.

V. CONCLUSION

The theoretical literature review, learners’ questionnaire and teachers’ interview have shown that a negotiated syllabus serves many purposes and may have a positive impact on learners’ motivation, academic achievement, critical thinking skills and personal development. Yet, implementing a negotiated syllabus at the VTC will be a difficult task and this is mainly because of demotivated learners, overloaded teachers and the top-down management system. Nevertheless, these challenges should not prevent qualified, dedicated and creative teachers from being involved in implementing an NS. Gradualism and professionalism in the implementation process are keys to success.

The findings have implications for teachers and syllabus designers in the realm of TEFL in particular and adult vocational education in general. Teachers can help less motivated adult learners make decisions about their learning. Textbook writers, especially in the context of VTC, have to consider the needs of adult learners who are disengaged from school. A need for the inclusion of, and emphasis on, learning and teaching critical thinking skills is a necessity.

Since this current study is limited to three teachers and one military training centre, it has some limitations. Firstly, it is difficult to generalise the results since the size of the sample is relatively small: Fifty learners and three teachers. Secondly, none of the other core subject teachers took part in the study to validate the feasibility of the implementation of an NS in other courses. Lastly, the research has only focused on the military learners. However, it is necessary to investigate the potential of implementing an NS in other vocational departments to find out the possibility of generalising the findings of this study. There is a need for more comprehensive research on the impact and effectiveness of an NS on improving the four language skills and learners’ motivation. This research needs to demonstrate whether the NS approach can be successfully applied by other teachers and students in other schools.

It is the researchers’ belief that many teachers can implement an NS effectively if they comprehend its basic features and have the motivation and encouragement to be guides on the side rather than sages on the stage. We have no doubt that an NS could yield more fruitful results, especially if it is institutionalised.

APPENDIX A LEARNERS' SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE
(Part I – Part III are adapted from Nunan 1988, pp. 322-325)

PART 1: Reasons for learning English

Question 1: Why do you want to learn English?

INSTRUCTIONS: For Part II to Part IV: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by checking (✓) the appropriate box. Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA), Neither agree nor disagree (N), Disagree (D), Strongly disagree (SD)

Area	Indicator (item)	A	SA	N	D	SD
PART II: Methodological Preferences (MP)	Question 1: How do you like learning?					
	(a) individually?	0	18	10	10	2
	(b) in pairs?	12	0	2	0	26
	(c) in small groups?	0	12	15	13	0
	(d) in one large group?	2	0	8	0	30
	Question 2: How would you like to spend the time in the classroom?					
	(a) Doing some kind of activity based on your personal and work experience and interests?	10	16	14	0	0
PART III: Content (C)	Question 3: Do you need to learn thinking skills such as					
	(a) decision- making (DM)?	40	0	0	0	0
	(b) problem-solving (PS)?	40	0	0	0	0
PART IV: Negotiated decisions (ND)	Question 4: Do you want to be involved in DM about the....					
	a) purposes of learning English at VTC?	0	25	8	7	0
	b) content of the English syllabus?	0	37	3	0	0
	c) teaching methods?	40	0	0	0	0
	d) evaluation of your achievement?	0	40	0	0	0

PART V: Please answer the following questions. Give reasons.

Question	Yes	No	Reasons
5) Involving learners in DM about their learning motivates them to learn.	34	6	
6) A negotiated syllabus is appropriate for learners at VTC.	15	25	

Thank you for your cooperation and wish you all success.

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Mohammad A. Assaf is an instructor of English at the UAE Ministry of Education. He holds a PhD in TESOL from The British University in Dubai. His main research interests include several areas, such as curriculum, writing and reading in L2 and thinking skills.



Mohammad I. Zabadi is an instructor of English at Gulf University for Science and Technology-Kuwait. He holds a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Bristol-UK. His research interests lie in second language acquisition and literary translation studies.



Emad A. S. Abu-Ayyash is an assistant professor of TESOL at The British University in Dubai. His research interests include several areas, such as TESOL, discourse analysis and translation.