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EFFECTIVENESS OF A NEGOTIATED SYLLABUS FOR EFL VOCABULARY LEARNING

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation was to verify whether the students' vocabulary retention abilities improved as a consequence of using a learner-centered approach such as the negotiated syllabus. The sample for this paper consisted of two groups of male and female Spanish teenagers of 16 to 18 years old who had an intermediate level of English. For better comparison of any effects of the syllabus, only one group was able to negotiate the topic of the unit and a questionnaire was completed at the beginning and ending of each group's teaching unit to measure the students' vocabulary retention. The results of this study did not provide evidence that using the negotiated syllabus to decide the topic of the lessons improved the student's abilities to learn vocabulary any more than other teaching approaches do. However, the fact that this study did not indicate any positive effects of syllabus negotiation does not mean this approach lacks the potential to help ESL learners. However, the small number of professionals who have put into practice this approach and the insecurity caused to teachers who try to implement it for the first time puts syllabus negotiation at a great disadvantage.

Summary

A study was set up in Madrid, Spain, to investigate how efficient the learner-centered approach truly is in nowadays lessons; whether its teaching views and dedication to the learner's needs can be useful for the Spanish classrooms; and whether these types of approaches can be successfully implemented in a country with a strong ESL teaching past based mainly on the grammar translation method. For this paper, the type of student-centered learning chosen to implement in the classroom was negotiation, more specifically syllabus negotiation.

This paper's aim is to establish the syllabus negotiation's viability in a classroom as well as to verify whether the learners' marks improved after shifting to this new approach in comparison to the group who did not negotiate its syllabus. Special attention was paid to vocabulary learning and its retention among the students. For this paper I used a sample of 29 participants from both genders whose ages were 16 to 18 years old and had an intermediate English level. The participants had been divided by their high school in two different groups of 14 and 15 students. Of these groups only one of them was able to negotiate its syllabus while the other did not have the choice.

In order to accurately measure vocabulary learning in both groups, two questionnaires were handed out to each group: one before starting and a second questionnaire one week after each group's surveilled teaching unit ended. All questionnaires had a test to mark how much vocabulary the students could retain, these tests consisted of contextualized and non-contextualized vocabulary items.

In the end the results did not show that the implementation of the negotiated syllabus had significant positive or negative effects in the group's ability to retain vocabulary compared to more traditional approaches.

Descriptors

Negotiated syllabus, negotiated curriculum, learner-centered methodology, EFL, ESL, English learning, vocabulary learning, contextualized vocabulary, non-contextualized vocabulary.

Justification

If the hypothesis of this paper proves to be correct and vocabulary can actually be learnt and retained by pupils more easily when the syllabus of the unit studied is chosen by students according to their interests and what motivates them (what we could call a customized syllabus), it would mean the beginning of a considerable development for English teaching on several levels. Several authors like Schiefele (1996), Falakeh (1998) or Behjat (1999) agree on the idea that presenting the learning input based on the learners' interests influences significantly their learning improvement.

First of all it would entail an increase in the efficiency of English teaching. If students retain more vocabulary by negotiating the syllabus it would mean that teachers would be able to teach more contents in a shorter time span and with even better results than with the current methodology. Without a doubt all teachers would be delighted to see such results in his or her students, results that would encourage them to work with higher expectations.

We cannot forget another dimension of this issue. If their pupils learn more, teachers could experience a sense of achievement as regards their job, improving their overall performance at work, their personal fulfilment and possibly decreasing the risk of suffering from burnout syndrome.

Looking at it from the learner's point of view, if students notice they are learning English (or another language) more efficiently and while having a good time, they will likely feel overjoyed. This would also lead to a rise of their motivation towards foreign language learning. Furthermore, students will also get more involved with the lesson dynamics if they see actual results from the lessons. In addition we must not forget that learners will behave differently if they are free to negotiate their syllabus because they will be aware that their thoughts are being heard and take into account. This is Jon Cook's (1992) ownership principle: "Like adults children have needs, wants and points of views; they will work hard to get what they want and they can understand the trade-off, involving the recognition of inevitable constraints and the impossible".

In the end, the relationship between teachers and students would also improve, not only as a result of learning English but also as a consequence of negotiating the syllabus. For Grunert (1997), the syllabus is the beginning of the interaction between teachers and learners because it clarifies both parties' responsibilities, helps set the tone of the classes

and is a way to describe the teacher's view on the educational purpose of the course. When the teacher gets interested in knowing more about what motivates his/her students and their interests, the students will feel the teacher is not only teaching them something as part of his/her job, but actually trying to understand them a little bit better.

It is also worth mentioning the fact that, according to Yalden (1987), designing a syllabus requires two ingredients that need to be taken into consideration: knowledge of the subject and learner-specific variables. Syllabus designers for English courses have the first but cannot guarantee that the second is met. Learner-specific variables make that different countries and different regions from the same country have diverse learners. The same happens with learners from different age groups, social class or gender. So, in the end, having only one syllabus for many different learners makes it impossible for that syllabus to satisfy the learner's needs while, on the other hand, negotiated syllabi seem a viable option for ESL learning.

Relationship to teaching practices in the field of specialization

One of the basics for the efficient and adequate learning of a foreign language is vocabulary. For this dissertation I compared two groups of students and the amount of vocabulary they retained under different circumstances. One of the groups was given the syllabus the teacher had prepared for the period of time in which this experiment took place. Meanwhile, the second group had a syllabus that differed from the other group because this syllabus was decided by the students themselves.

With this paper my aim is to establish whether students learn and retain more vocabulary when they are given the chance to choose a syllabus which motivates them more to learn English or to at least pay more attention during the lessons.

Usually teachers who teach foreign languages, in this case those who teach English, have focused for many decades on teaching grammar correctly to their pupils. In recent years, grammar has been slightly displaced in classrooms by polishing the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Several teaching movements appeared and tried to ease and improve the pupil's path to master English as a second language.

However, just like Bers, Davis & Taylor (1996) mention: "Despite the importance of the syllabus, little attention is given to the analysis of its characteristics". We could say that due to the current situation where other aspects have received most of the attention from teachers and educational researchers, syllabuses as well as vocabulary have been neglected in comparison to other aspects of language learning such as listening, speaking, interaction between peers or even non-linguistic aspects like cooperative learning, which have undergone important changes in the way they are taught.

Therefore, vocabulary has not received the same degree of attention that skills, learning methods and strategies have, even though some of them can also be used to improve the learning and teaching of vocabulary. For example, many cooperative learning activities can be easily adapted to teach vocabulary. In this case I would like to mention the "Give one take one"¹ Kagan activity, which can be very versatile and easily adapted depending on the teacher's purposes.

In this activity students make two columns titled Give and Take. First they must write in the Give column vocabulary the teacher asks them. After a few minutes, they must get up and trade those words with other students. Each word a student receives from a peer will be written in the Take column. The last step is up to the teacher's choice whether to make the students for example self-assess themselves or do another exercise.

The same happens with both speaking and listening skills, where the aim of an activity can be adapted solely to review known vocabulary or to encourage students to put into practice newly learned vocabulary depending on whether the recording or the topic/context for the oral production are already familiar to the students or something new they have learnt.

As regards ESL acquisition and learning, grammar, writing, reading, listening and speaking are bound to be of almost equal importance when someone learns or teaches a second language. But even if all of them are of paramount importance, none can actually grow and develop unless they are nourished properly, and in this case vocabulary becomes the fuel that makes beginner level students to truly improve their English. Just like Swan and Walter (1984) said, "Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner." Grammar cannot be taught if pupils are not capable of understanding the meaning of the nouns and verbs in that appear in the sentences. Furthermore, in any language writing, reading, listening and speaking all need words for their comprehension or production by the learner.

However, what has been said above regarding the importance of vocabulary does not only apply to beginners and intermediate students. Speakers who are already fluent will eventually reach a level in which the main thing that separates them from proficiency in English or any other language is the amount of words, idioms, links or collocations they possess and are able to use freely in order to get develop more native-like proficiency.

Description of relationship of the topic with the teaching practice developed in a secondary school

During the period of time I spent at Felicidad High school Educational Centre (the name of the centre as well as other details have been changed on purpose in order to maintain the privacy of every person or institution that appears in this paper) I was able to experience first hand the current situation of English teaching in Spanish estate schools.

Felicidad High school is an educational centre with over 1200 students during the day and another one thousand pupils who take lessons in the evening. It is located in an area of the center of Madrid in which the majority of the population is from the upper middle class. However, the rest of the area's population is from the lower middle class. This difference creates a complex environment for students inside the school that can be summarized in a sentence one of the school's teachers told me. "Here, some student's mothers are housemaids and clean other student's homes," he said.

This is the reason why different kinds of students can be seen walking through the corridors of Felicidad High school, some of them are immigrants or children of immigrants (mainly from South American countries) while others are Spanish but from different social backgrounds. These differences can mainly be seen in the ways they dress and behave towards each other and towards the teachers.

With my mentor I was able to observe students from the years she taught: five classes from 1st and 2nd years of Bachillerato. Except one of these groups which was an A, the others were labeled for organizational purposes with letters from E onwards (letter A groups are considered to be the best, and as the alphabet continues, the student's grades are usually lower).

In all the groups students saw English quite as a challenge, particularly in 2nd Bachillerato. All of them had developed fairly well their listening and reading skills but were weaker when it came to speaking, writing and grammar. They had great difficulties to express themselves even in incorrect English, without having to resort to Spanish or a mix of words made up from combining both languages deliberately.

I began to consider the hypothesis of this paper after watching these groups and teaching them, when some events took place. Firstly, I was teaching 2nd Bachillerato a grammar lesson, the topic was conditional sentences. For this lesson I prepared a game in which I

handed out several sheets of paper to the students. Each sheet had written in it only the condition of a conditional sentence. The condition was hidden and each pair of students had to write a result in the first, second or third conditional based on what type of sheet they had received.

The aim of this game was to make grammar more enjoyable and for students to come up with funny sentences that made no sense while reviewing what was learned during the lesson. When I read aloud the conditions I had previously written and the results given by the students, I noticed that most of the parts students had been able to come up with were too simplistic in terms of vocabulary and that a couple of the results even had words such as kill or potatoes repeated.

Even though the activity was a success in terms of fun and almost all the students had written correctly the first, second and third conditional forms, I felt it had not been truly exploited by the students. I took me a while to figure out why I felt disappointed and finally came up with an explication: they could not think of more words with such a short period of notice because the number of words they knew was poor and within that number of words, those they used frequently in lessons were even fewer in number.

The second time I had a similar experience was also with a 2nd Bachillerato class. I had been asked to teach them how to write opinion essays for their upcoming exams, so I spent an entire lesson on this topic. Once again, I noticed they only knew a few connectors to express their points of view or to link one sentence with the next one to create a cohesive text. Moreover, even though they remembered these few connectors, they were not able to use them in their essays because they seldom tried to include them when they wrote compositions in English and therefore often forgot they knew such words that could significantly improve their compositions.

Some days later, when I was marking their essays, I noticed how the great majority stuck to essential vocabulary in their essays as well as when they discussed with other peers during class activities or when they answered the teacher. The fact that they also repeated constantly the same structures such as "I think" for expressing opinions despite being suggested the day before to use other structures they already knew like "from my point of view" or "in my opinion" for example was surprising. Furthermore, there were several other cases, for example when they tended to say "I like/ I do not like" sentences at times when they could have used other synonyms such as "I prefer, I love or I fancy" which they had already practiced for several years.

The third and last occasion which lead me to think of how customizing a syllabus could lead to learning improvement was in a lesson with my mentor, Margarita (as I mentioned before, all names have been changed in order to maintain the privacy of the people involved). On Fridays she used from time to time the whole lesson to discuss with her students their plans for the weekend. These kinds of lessons let me see the change in the student's mood and how the level of participation increased when they were talking about something that on the one hand affected them personally and that, on the other hand motivated them to speak in English (especially when they had particularly interesting plans for the next few days and they wanted to share them with the rest of the class). During these lessons Margarita corrected the students, who seemed more receptive towards making changes in their sentences.

All the events mentioned above helped me think of vocabulary learning through making changes in the syllabus as a plausible hypothesis for this paper.

The lesson regarding the conditional was a window to verify that my students had a small pool of words to choose from, a dangerous weakness for those who had to do the university entrance exam. Later on, the essay lesson was important to the hypothesis of this paper because when I corrected their essays I could clearly see the gap using certain vocabulary generated between weak students. As it is said, two houses can be badly taken care of, but if one has been painted, the feeling it gives when looking at it changes significantly, and the same goes for vocabulary. Finally, Margarita's Friday lessons made me realize that student relaxation and motivation seemed to have an effect on vocabulary retention.

Research aims

The principal objective of this paper is to verify whether by switching from traditional methodology to a learner-centered approach (a negotiated syllabus) in English lessons, the students respond positively to the change and show some improvement in their ESL learning process. I will specifically monitor if the student sample can learn and retain more words than with normal methodologies when they are given the opportunity to negotiate the subject's syllabus with their teacher. In theory, offering the students this chance should improve their results as well as motivate them more than normal lessons.

This motivation should originate firstly from the feelings they will experience from taking an active role, thus giving them the impression that lesson making does not belong any more exclusively to the teacher because they also played a small role in the course design, just like it was stated in an edition of *Teaching Tips*: "students who have options and a sense of personal control are likely to be more highly motivated for learning" (McKeachie, 1999, p. 17). Furthermore, curiosity will also be a feeling that can motivate them: curiosity that originates from this new experience of negotiating their syllabus and curiosity born from seeing how lessons that were boring might become something different just because they chose the topic of their teaching unit.

During my internship at Felicidad High school I observed that my students had a lower intermediate level of English. The subject I taught during those months was specially focused on speaking and listening, which is how I noticed my students' main problem regarding vocabulary: they possessed a small word pool to choose from when they talked about themselves, discussed about a topic or performed a role play.

In this case their lack of vocabulary was becoming a hindrance for them to improve their speaking and listening skills, so I started thinking about possible ways to help them learn more words. Since my lessons were speaking and listening centered, I knew I could not rely on worksheets and other traditional written exercises like listing words to make my pupils improve the amount of vocabulary they would use. Furthermore my teachers from the MA at Universidad Complutense constantly told me to try and make lessons as fun as possible in order to keep the students focused.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Syllabi have experienced an evolution in their own way, which has mainly focused on how they are seen by teachers. Syllabi have gone from being a mere tool for course design that just helped the teachers structure everything to becoming an active aspect of teaching where learners can nowadays give their input and teachers adapt the syllabus according to their students' needs.

There are several views on what a syllabus is and many writers have given their own point of view through various definitions. For example, according to Hall (1999), Pienemann (1985) defines the syllabus as "the selection and grading of linguistic teaching objectives" (p.4). On the other hand, Breen (1984) thinks of syllabus as "a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and about student learning" (p. 4). Candlin gives another definition in this summary: Syllabuses are concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners. They have, traditionally, the mark of authority. They are concerned with the achievement of ends, often, though not always, associated with the pursuance of particular means (Candlin, 1984:30). Widdowson's view on the matter is also different, for him the syllabus is simply a framework within which activities can be carried out: a teaching device to facilitate learning. It only becomes a threat to pedagogy when it is regarded as absolute rules for determining what is to be learned rather than points of reference from which bearings can be taken.

The concept of the negotiated syllabus as well as any kind of negotiation within classrooms can be said to have its origins in John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, who in the early twentieth century separated themselves from the time's mainstream education. They advocated for collaborative responsibility instead of competition and choice rather than coercion and rejected that children had to learn by rote memory. Later on, in the seventies Paulo Freire supported the idea of allowing learners to negotiate learning outcomes and to cooperate with teachers and other students in a process of discovery. The psychologist Carl Rogers also contributed to pedagogy with ideas such as education as a process that lasts as long as the learner lives and the teacher in the role of facilitator, which are nowadays becoming the backbone of education.

During the 1970s and the 1980s researches in second language acquisition paved the way for an increment in the importance of negotiating and interacting in language acquisition, which gave birth to the communicative language teaching movement in

English as a foreign language education and its successive developments when the widespread concern was how to make the teaching and learning process more communicative. One of these developments was the learner-centered curriculum that sought learner's involvement to design the learning curriculum through negotiation.

Breen & Littlejohn (2000, p. 1) defined syllabus negotiation as a "discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organized". They also speak of three plains of definition for the term "negotiation": *personal* (which is mental, as in reading or listening), *interactive* (as one interacts with another person), and *procedural* (when parties attempt to reach a consensus). The negotiated syllabus is when the views of the learners as well as the pedagogical agenda of the teacher are satisfied through a give-and-take process.

To be successful, a negotiated syllabus is based on an agreement between teacher and learners, but some writers have highlighted the fact that there are actually two types of contracts. For example, Hansen (1991) draws a line separating the explicit contract (the syllabus) from the implicit contract which is created by the teacher's and students' actions. Syllabus as an explicit contract "outline the protocols of the course: subject matter, number and times of class meetings, titles of texts and reading, grading policy, written and oral assignments, office hours and the like". On the other hand, the implicit contract is negotiated through non-verbal behavior as for example "nuances, overtones, implications and inferences which create the unspoken agreements by which the class conducts itself" (p.128). Eberly, Newton & Wiggins reflect about the importance of the implicit contract asserting that "Upon examining the extant literature on syllabus construction, three perspectives exist: syllabus as a legal document, syllabus as an organizational tool, and syllabus as a means of communication. Regardless of the perspective taken, as professors, we need to have an understanding of what we want in the explicit contract of the syllabus and what we allow to evolve as an implicit contract" (2001, p. 59).

As shown in Breen & Littlejohn's accounts of practice in Classroom Decision-Making, negotiation and process syllabus in practice, recently the number of successful experiences of teachers with syllabus negotiation and its viability in diverse countries with very different cultural backgrounds and in many education levels have increased and are reported by many writers (Boomer et al., 1992; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Huang, 2006; N. T. Nguyen, 2010; V. H. Nguyen, 2006). According to studies, classroom negotiation is helpful in drawing closer the teaching programme to the students' needs, it also increases

their motivation and the effectiveness of what they learn as well as how involved they get in the learning process. Furthermore, it helps learners mature by developing their sense of responsibility and gives them more confidence in themselves and self-esteem. It is also an advantage for teachers since negotiating the syllabus extends the teacher's teaching strategies.

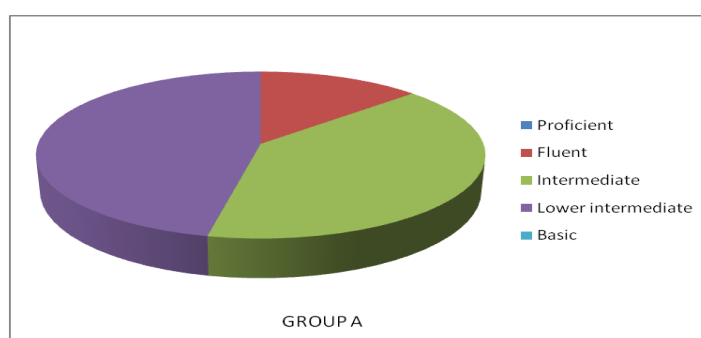
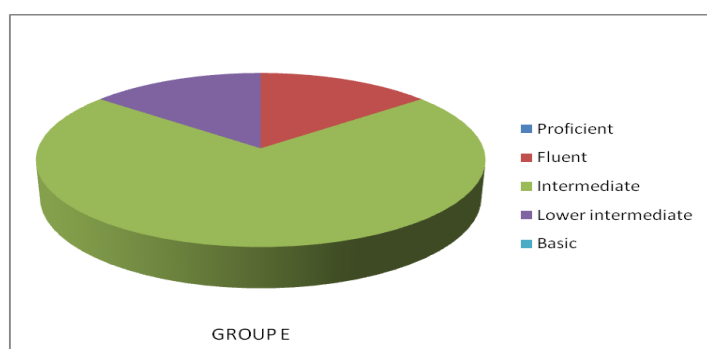
It can be said that, although the negotiated syllabus is currently a rare choice for teachers in the context of this study, in the future it will increase its popularity when more research and studies are done on it. Despite this, I can say with confidence that even if it has many benefits for teachers and learners, negotiation is unlikely to take over traditional syllabus.

Participants

To put into practice my hypothesis this paper I had a sample of 29 participants. All of them were students of Felicidad High school who studied 1st Bachillerato and had Spanish nationality –although I must mention a minority of approximately 20% were children of immigrants, mostly from Latin-American countries.

The participants were between 16 and 18 years old. They were divided by the school itself according to their academic aspirations in two different groups: Group A had 15 participants while Group E was formed by 14 participants. In both groups there was a great majority of female participants (22) and only a few male students (7).

In both Group A and Group E the students had almost the same English level, which it could be said is lower intermediate, and almost the same problems in relation to learning English. In the questionnaires I asked them what they thought their level of English was in the four language skills. Here are some pie charts showing the results for speaking.



As it can be seen, the great majority of the participants thought they had an intermediate or lower intermediate level in speaking and only a few of them considered themselves fluent in English.

Methodology

Since both groups had the same English level, I decided to ask Margarita about their academic background to choose which group would be negotiating its own syllabus. She told me the school did not place the students in different groups under any criteria other than the type of Bachillerato they had chosen. However, she mentioned that even if it is coincidental, smarter and better-behaved groups usually have letters from the beginning of the alphabet. Therefore, under the assumption that pupils from Group A were normally a bit faster than those from Group E, I decided to make Group E the achiever of the two and monitor whether it showed any signals of improvement throughout the experiment.

To gather the necessary data about the participants for this paper's hypothesis, I decided to carry out quantitative research that would show the final results in a more comprehensible way. First of all I handed out two different questionnaires to each group in order to evaluate more accurately any progress. I will provide more detailed information regarding the questionnaires afterwards.

The first step was to make Group E choose a topic so I could design their syllabus and later on implement it. The first attempt was by telling them about the new circumstances by which they would be able to choose a certain topic of their liking. That time I gave them 2 days to think about one or more topic so in the next lesson we could do a poll to see the favorite topic in the class. However, the students forgot to give it some thought and all they could think of was music, so I was not able to make the poll that day.

For the next lesson what I did was pre-select four different topics that I thought Group E would like. The idea was to make a poll based on these four topics. This way I would not be depending on the participants' memory to make the poll and I had the chance to choose topics with which I as a teacher was more comfortable to teach and that could be approached didactically. That was an aspect I had not considered when I thought of letting the students come up with the topic and a factor that could have placed me in a tight spot teaching a topic with no didactic approach or insufficient to be the cornerstone of an entire didactic unit.

As I mentioned before, I had chosen four different topics for Group E to choose from. The first was the one the students themselves had proposed, music. The others were jobs, the internet and communication methods. These topics were all selected based on the kind of

things that I thought would motivate Group E more, leading to a possible leap in learning vocabulary.

In addition, the topic “jobs” had a more practical approach that could be useful for the students in the near future with content such as how to write your own CV. On the other hand, the internet and new communication methods were planned to be fairly interactive teaching units due to the student’s experience with new technologies such as Whatsapp, Facebook or Twitter.

When the poll day arrived I was surprised by the results since I expected a bit of a struggle from the students to choose between one of these topics. The poll process was easy: I wrote the four topics on the blackboard, explained briefly the contents of the teaching unit and then asked the students to raise their hands for the topic they liked most.

In the end, jobs ended up last with zero votes; the internet and new communication methods received no more than three votes; and music was the obvious winner with more than 70% of the votes.

Questionnaire

For this paper I collected two different questionnaires filled out by the participants at two different moments: a pretest and a post test. The pre test was done before starting the teaching units with each group to evaluate the level of English as well as the differences both groups had, while the post test was handed out after finishing each group's teaching unit in order to observe the progress of the experiment among them. An important aspect of the post test is that it was done approximately 7 days after finishing the teaching unit so I could measure more accurately the improvement from group E regarding vocabulary retention.

Since the aim of this paper is essentially to evaluate whether giving a certain level of freedom to the students helps them learn more vocabulary, the questionnaires were designed in order to get useful results in this area by evaluating the participants' vocabulary. Both tests were given to the students in Spanish instead of English, the rationale behind it is that students could misunderstand or guess the meaning of certain questions if they did not know all its words, making the questionnaire useless. Now I will firstly focus on the pre test and after that I will describe the post test.

I applied the pre test to both groups on the same week before starting the teaching units. It is clearly divided in two separate parts: the first one is made up of several multiple choice questions such as *"For how many years have you studied English?: (1)1-3 years; (2)4-7 years; (3)6-10 years; (4)more than 10 years"* and rating scale questions like *"How do you feel about the topics of English lessons? (i.e., food, houses, etc.): (1) Very interesting; (2) Interesting; (3) Indifferent, (4) Hardly interesting; (5) Boring"*.

If I designed the first section to address the opinion of the participants, the second section of the pre test was more practical and tried to calculate how much vocabulary the participants had learned from the beginning of the academic year until the moment when it was handed out. With this purpose in mind I began asking the students from each group to let me borrow their notebooks so I could see what vocabulary they had written down and based on that make the second part of the questionnaire.

I had to evaluate the student's vocabulary learning ability as accurately as possible and in order to do that I decided to ask it in two different ways and letting them answer in two different forms.

By two forms of answering I am referring to the fact that I let the students the choice of either translate the vocabulary to Spanish or just make a description. The aim of this option is to favour students who remembered a word's meaning and could describe it but who could not tell its exact translation. Moreover, according to Cambridge Dictionary, "vocabulary" is "every word known and which is used by an individual". In other words, Cambridge University considers vocabulary learning is to know and use a word, and this concept would be excluded if I only asked for the translation of words in the questionnaire.

As regards the two different ways of asking vocabulary I mentioned above, I made two questions for the students to answer. The difference between them is that in one I just listed the words, while in the second question the words were in a context. The aim is once again to favour all kinds of students. Some learn and recall vocabulary just by seeing the word in a list whether others do better with some context. Although, as Folse (2004) states, "[...] compared four modes of presentation, including lists: (1) words presented in isolation, (2) words in minimal context, i.e., in one meaningful sentence [...]. Retention scores for word recognition were superior when less information or limited context was given about the word (as in modes 1 and 2) and inferior when more information or extended context was given".

Besides differentiating in the questionnaire between vocabulary with and without context, I included vocabulary the students were taught in different moments so I could calculate how much vocabulary they retain and when they learn more. Some words or expressions were taught recently (in the last month) while others were between one and three months old and last but not least some of them were seen in the lessons more than three months ago.

When I was designing the pre test, I had a bit of trouble placing the vocabulary in the context or non context sections. In order to have accurate results I could not allow more difficult words to be placed in one or another section. Therefore, even if subjective, the only way I thought of to solve this problem was by my own judgement: I tried to distribute equally words and expressions according to how difficult I thought they would be to translate or describe for the participants.

On the other hand, the post test was designed differently for each group of students. Firstly, the vocabulary section was different because the syllabuses of their units were not the same. However, in the post test I maintained the same structure as in the pre test: one

question in which the words appeared without any context and a second question where they were used in a sentence.

The second modification regarding the questions is that I changed them slightly depending on the group who was going to complete the questionnaire. As a result, group E's questionnaire had a few questions more than group A's because they were the ones who got to choose their syllabus.

These additional questions were included in order to get a glimpse of, on the one hand, how motivated the students were during the lessons and, on the other hand, to see if they *agreed with the aim of the negotiated syllabus*.

Student motivation was briefly addressed with the following question: *"In relation to the expectations you had before beginning, these lessons about music: (1) Have been better than what I had expected; (2) Have been more or less what I had expected; (3) Have been worse than what I had expected"*. Based on the results, I will be able to mark the participants' motivation because if the lessons were "worse than what they had expected", it means they got bored throughout the unit and therefore paid less attention to any vocabulary the teacher taught them.

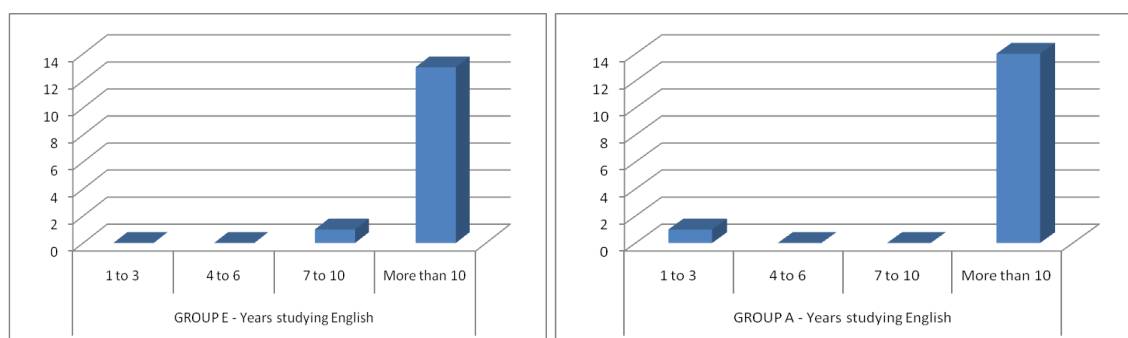
Results: Analysis and Interpretation

Based on the questionnaires I handed out to the participants, who were split in two different groups: A and E, I have been able to get some interesting results. Below I will proceed to analyze what the participants answered in their questionnaires. Firstly I am going to focus on the pre test results for both groups by starting off with a language background analysis of the participants and afterwards I will begin with the post test results.

After all the data is analyzed I will approach the participants' vocabulary retention. I prefer to do this at the end so the overall results are compacted in only a few lines instead of being divided in two (pre and post test) and far away for the reader.

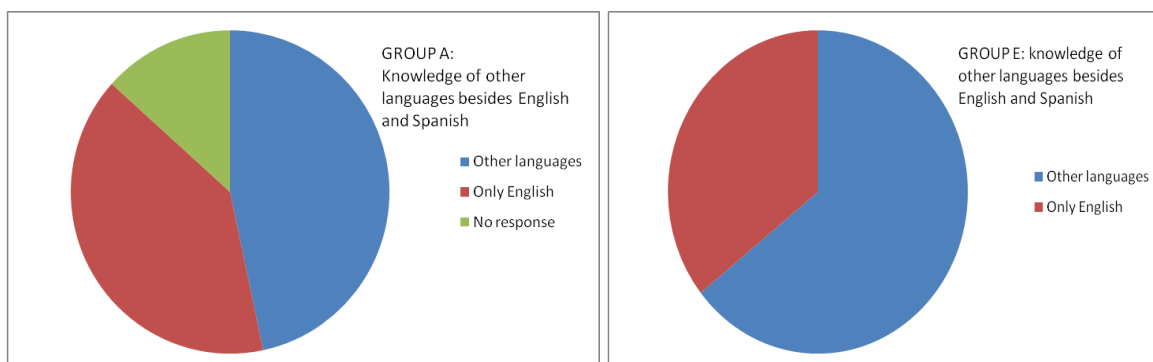
Pre Test Results

Before going on to other results it is important to know in depth the participants: group A and group E (the one which had the chance to choose its syllabus). As it can be appreciated below both groups are quite similar, almost all the students have been studying English for more than 10 years. This means their age of initiation in ESL learning was at the early age 6 or under. These results were predictable since for over a decade parents and Government institutions are very aware of the importance of children learning English in order to survive in a globalized world like ours.

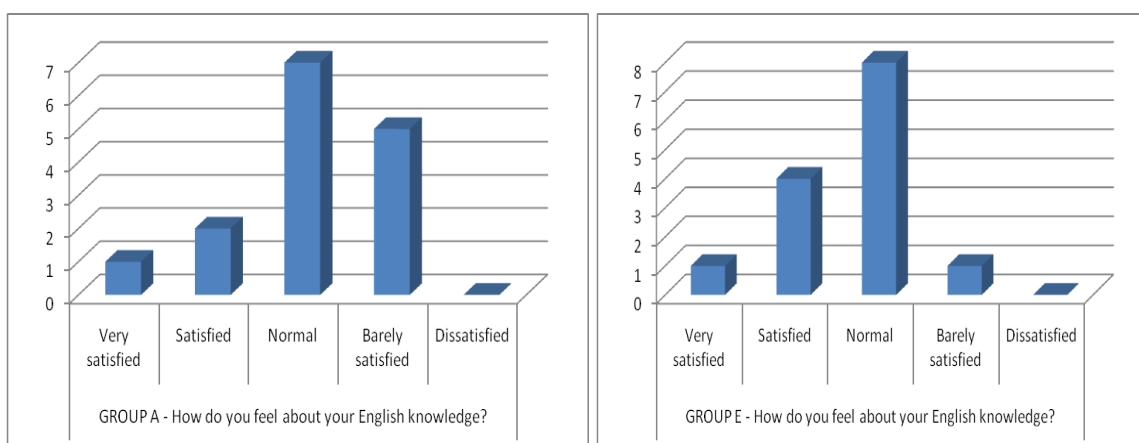


However, nowadays English is not the only foreign language taught in many schools. Below are the results of how many students know more than one foreign language, the results show almost a draw in group A between those who know other languages (47%) and those who do not (40%). On the other hand, group E has the upper hand with 64% students who speak other languages. These pie charts did not take into account the children of immigrants who may speak at home their parents' mother tongue, but

according to my data most children of immigrants were from Spanish speaking countries, so they did not possess any kind of advantage. In addition the charts do not differentiate between those who speak fluently and those who have lower levels in the other foreign languages.



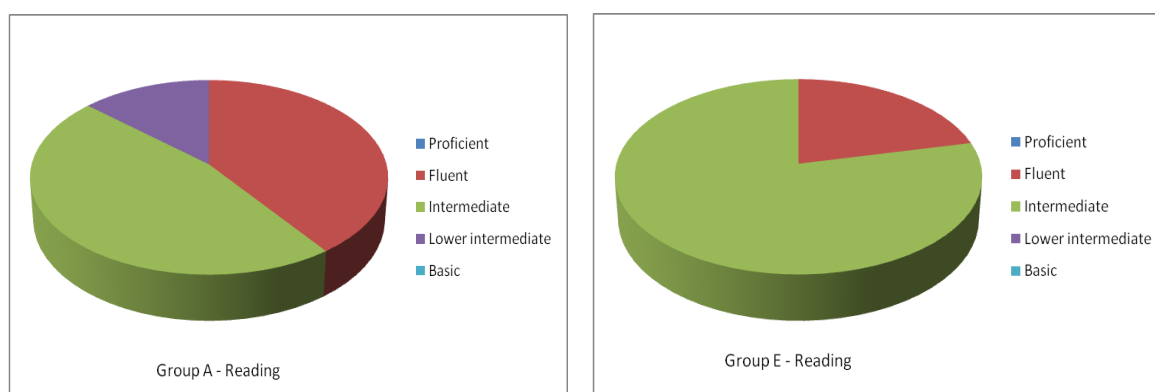
Therefore, the next graphs are going to try and shed light on this issue. How did the participants feel about their current knowledge?



As can be seen, in both groups the majority of the participants feel average as regards their knowledge. On the other hand, the differences can be spotted in the second major choice: group E has more positive feelings because 28% of the participants declare to be satisfied with their current knowledge of English while only 13% of group A has such positive thinking. Despite this, many students in group A feel barely satisfied (33%) with how much they have achieved. If we take into consideration the fact that almost all of the participants have spent over 10 years studying English, these results are somewhat discouraging for any teacher because it means that 7 out of every 10 participants think they have been learning barely enough English since they were children.

Moreover, this data can also mean that with the current syllabus creation process in Spain, students do not learn as much as they could with other options such as the one being proposed in this paper: the negotiated or customized syllabus.

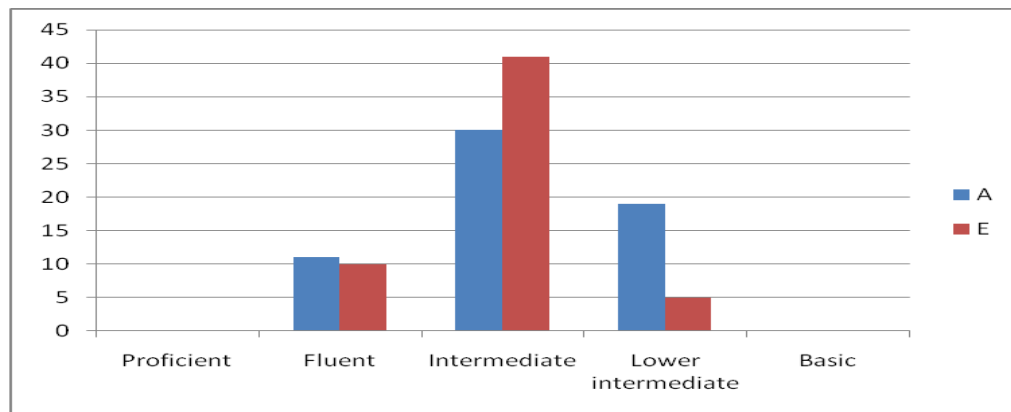
However, these are in a sense inaccurate because they do not show more precise data about the participants' level. That is the reason why I asked them to grade their abilities for the four main language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. All four can be found at the annex, but now I will only include the one which shocked me the most because it had the highest self-rating in both groups: reading.



The reason I did not expect this results was not due to the skill itself. Reading is usually the easiest language skill to be learned since it is on the one hand a receptive skill which on the contrary of speaking or writing does not need the learner to actively participate in the process. On the other hand, in comparison to listening the student has the chance to re-read the text as many times as s/he wants.

I was surprised because, as demonstrated above, participants from group A supposedly had lower self-confidence regarding English than participants from group E, since many of group A's were students barely satisfied with their English knowledge. However, in this case we have the opposite situation in which 40% of group A consider they are fluent in reading English and 47% think of themselves as intermediate learners. Meanwhile group E confirms students' perceptions are in accordance with the High school's hypothetical group distribution as this group rates itself lower than group A, with only 21% of its students considering they are fluent in reading.

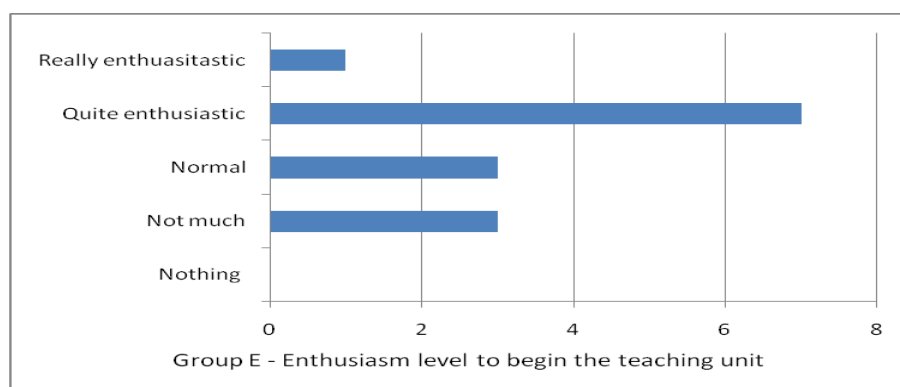
After seeing this difference among the results obtained I decided to include all four skills in the same chart to compare more easily both group's answers in order to see the whole picture of their skills self-evaluation.

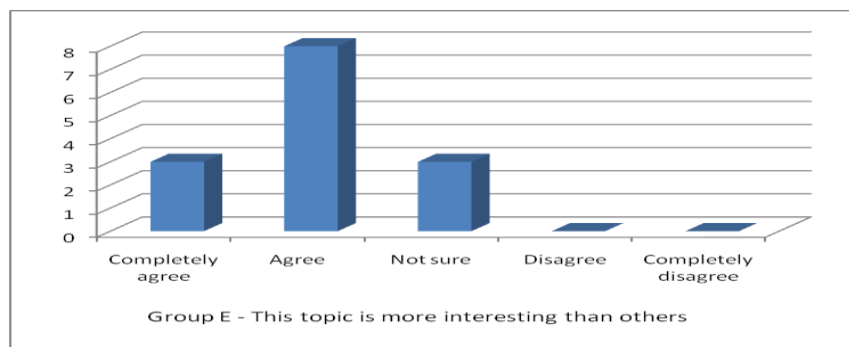


According to this graph, both groups have approximately the same number of fluent members. And it is clear that the difference between them is at the intermediate level, where it can be appreciated how, compared to group E, students from group A decrease significantly but increase those who chose the lower intermediate option to grade their English skills.

According to the students' perceptions, the weakest group is not group E as I was told but group A. However, another explanation is that group A has higher expectations for academic success in English and as a consequence its students grade themselves lower than those of group E.

In group E's pre test I added a few items in the questionnaire aimed in particular to show firstly the group's motivation and secondly to get a first hand impression from the students in relation to the fact that of being able to participate in the subject's syllabus.

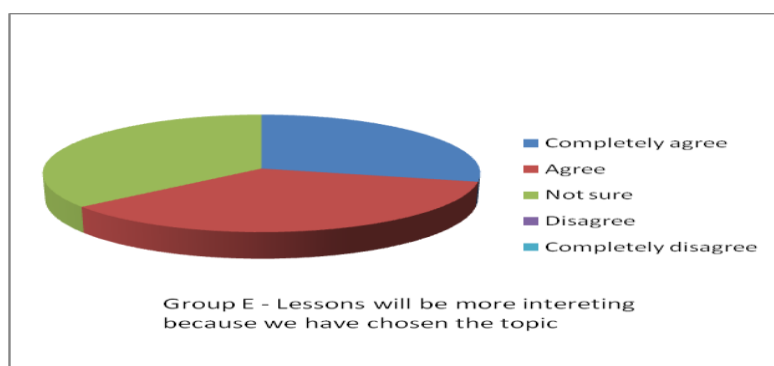




In the graphs from above we can see that in group E 57% of the students were enthusiastic with the thought of beginning the teaching unit while only 21% were not enthusiastic about it. On the other hand, when the participants were asked about the topic, 78% of them agreed with the fact that it was more interesting than others from previous teaching units.

If we take into account the previous charts and combine their results, it can be said that the participants' motivation level was pretty high before starting the teaching unit about music. They wanted to start the lessons and in addition most of them thought the topic they chose, music, was more interesting than others they did during the academic year.

These facts are very important to this paper's hypothesis with the aim to confirm if a negotiated syllabus enhances learning English, and in particular vocabulary retention. From this data it can be said that the participants were motivated and as a consequence of this motivation they were paying more attention during the next lessons in which their vocabulary retention was evaluated. If the response from the participants had been low, this experiment would have been pointless.



Finally, in this pie chart it can be observed the participants' point of view regarding the negotiated syllabus. Since I could not ask them directly about this kind of syllabus due to

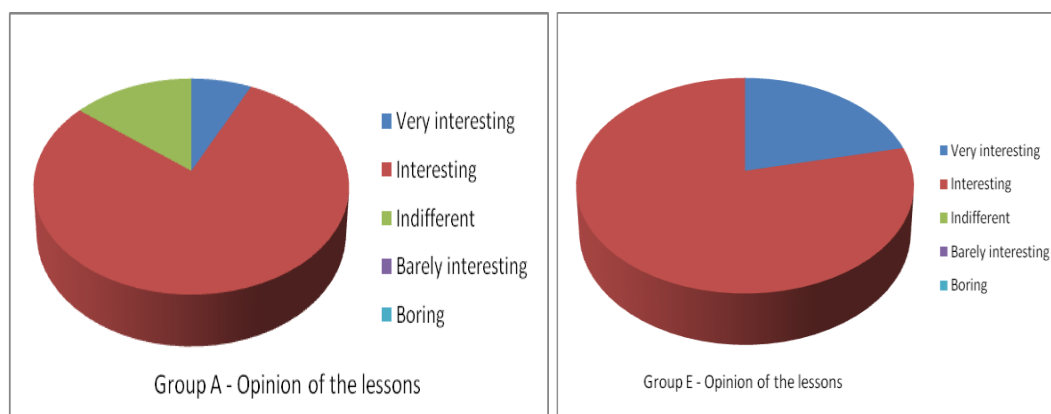
the explanations required, I thought this could be a good way to approach the participants' opinion without them being aware of the question's true intention.

I believe this is a good example of how interesting a customized syllabus can be for teachers and students. In group E 64% of the participants thought that if they chose the topic of a teaching unit, lessons would be more interesting than ordinary ones. And from the remaining percentage, none of those students disagreed with the affirmation but instead were just unsure about it (a perfectly normal result when faced with a new system they have never experienced before).

Post Test Results

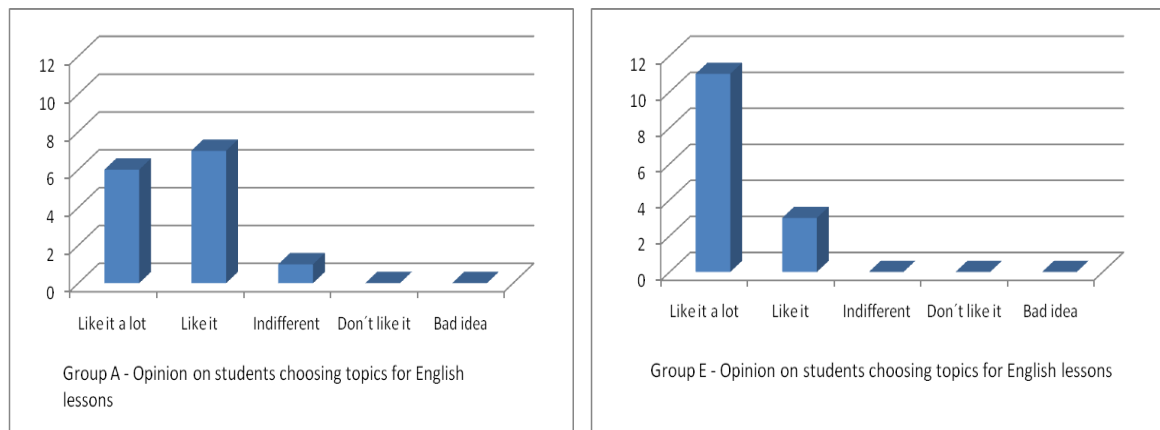
As I mentioned a few pages above, I will now proceed to analyze the results from the post test I handed out to the participants. Afterwards I will do the same with the vocabulary section for both tests.

In the pie charts located below, it is evident that the lessons with both groups were a success since 100% of group E thought them to be interesting or very interesting; over 86% of the participants in group A answered they were interesting and only 14% of the students from this group were indifferent. Even though the results are really good, group A who did not choose a topic for its teaching unit had slightly fewer "very interesting" students in comparison to group E and also 14% of its students remained indifferent to the lessons.



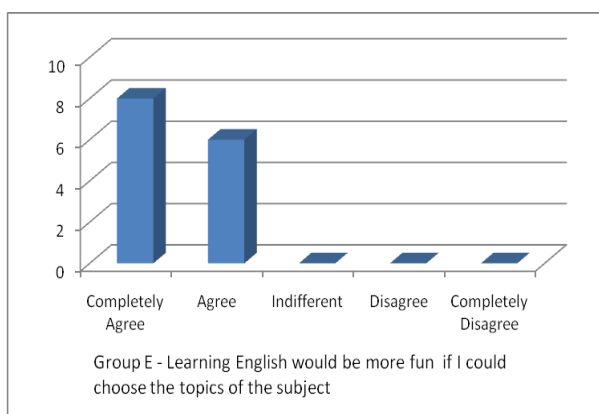
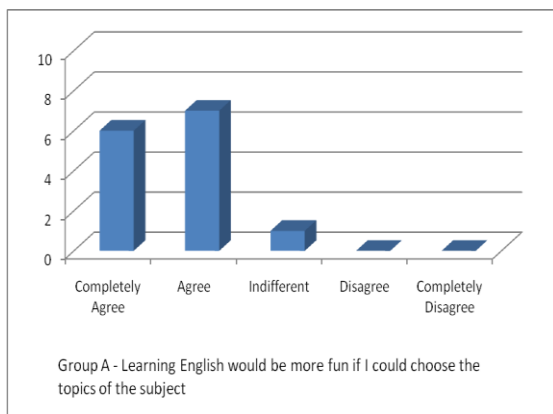
This small difference in opinion between the groups can be an evidence of how letting students choose their syllabus improves their opinion of lessons. This shallow gap is even more meaningful because in group A the student's interest on the topic, London, was higher than usual.

It was chosen by their teacher Margarita but all the students had a lot of interest because after ending the teaching unit they went on a one day trip to London. Therefore this unusual interest influenced on the results. Had group A not gone to London, I believe the opinion of the students would have most likely dropped, increasing the difference with group E which had the chance to negotiate its syllabus.



The results show that 96% of the participants from both groups “like a lot” or “like” the concept of the negotiated syllabus where students can choose the subject’s topics. This is a clear demonstration of how positive the students’ initial motivation towards these kinds of proposal is. I must mention there is a difference between both groups. In group E 79% of the participants “liked a lot” the idea of choosing the topics for their syllabus, whereas only 43% had the same opinion in group A.

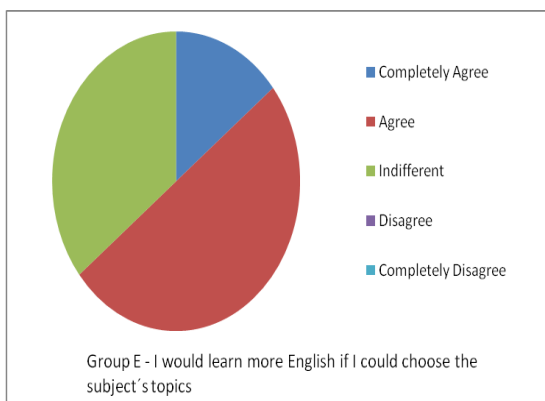
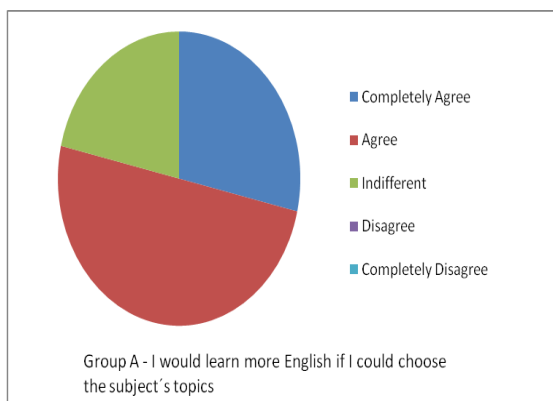
This difference between those who just liked it and those who liked it a lot can be explained in the following way: group E had the chance to choose the topic for its teaching unit while group A did not. Therefore the gap in percentages we see in the graphs is probably the difference between the group that experienced the negotiated syllabus and enjoyed it, and the group which could only imagine such situation and was not that sure about its advantages.



Along the same lines go the answers to the statement “Learning English would be more fun if I could choose the topics of the subject” made to the participants. As with the previous question, group E students who had firsthand experience in learning English with a negotiated syllabus showed a higher percentage of participants (57%) compared with group A (42%) who were completely sure that learning English would be more fun if teachers applied the negotiated syllabus to at least the topic of the lessons.

In my opinion these are important results for the teaching community that need to be considered because it is well known that for Spanish students English is one of the most difficult subjects in secondary education as well as in bachillerato and in most cases they struggle to succeed in their foreign language exams. As an example, the last research from the European Survey on Language Competences describes that 63% of Spanish students do not understand spoken English and 58% cannot achieve a level where they understand what they read (pre A1 & A1 levels) by the end of their compulsory education (ESO). According to this questionnaire, English could become easier for students if the negotiated syllabus was implemented in classrooms.

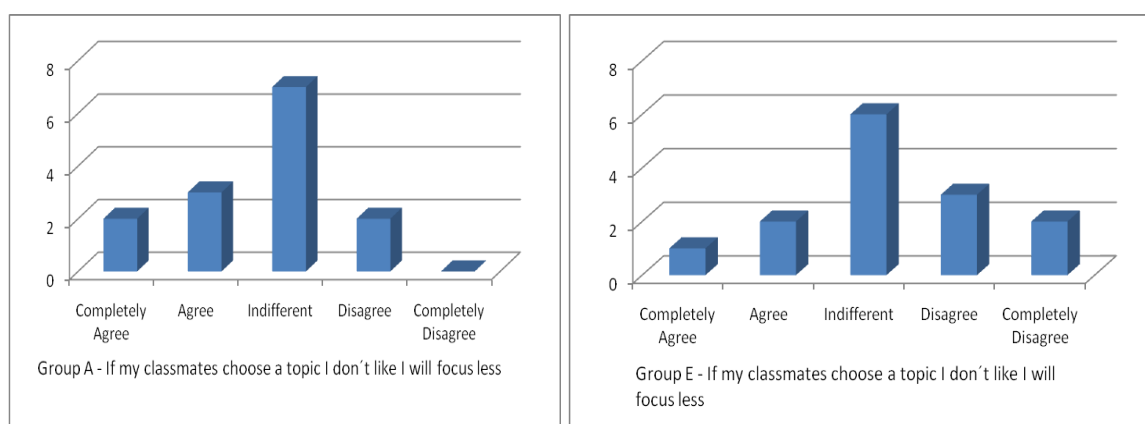
Based on this premise the next question I asked the participants was if they would learn more English with a negotiated syllabus than with the current teaching system.



The results for this item from the questionnaire were not as partial in other items. In both groups only 21% of the participants agreed completely to the statement, while 50% just agreed to it and 29% were not sure if they would learn more by having a negotiated syllabus. And despite being taught a negotiated teaching unit, 35% of group E was uncertain of its efficiency compared with the current methodology.

Taking into account this data, although it is difficult to foresee what would happen if the negotiated syllabus was introduced in the Spanish educational system, I think that many students would benefit from it, in particular those who lack some motivation or the ones who are on the edge of failing the subject. However, as with any other system, there will always exist a small percentage of students who will not learn English better or even enjoy it more be it because they hate high school or because their interests are not the same that those of the majority of their classmates.

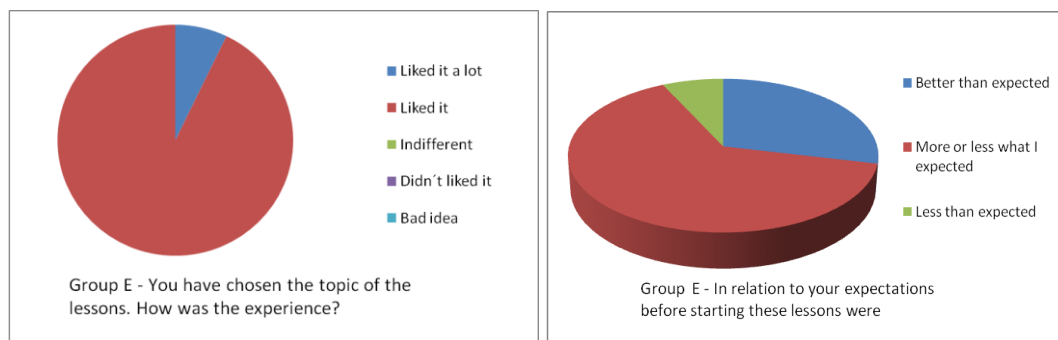
Regarding the possibility of a conflict of interests among the students, I decided to include an item in the questionnaire to address this issue which could turn into an important weakness of the negotiated syllabus: would students focus less if the chosen topic by their classmates did not fit their personal interests?



In general, most of the participants (46%) felt indifferent regarding this issue and had no strong opinions about it. On the other hand, the rest of the sample was very diverse. One in every four participants “disagreed” or “completely disagreed”, meaning they would focus the same during the lessons, even if the topic the majority of their classmates chose is not interesting for them. However, of this 25% only 7% are completely sure they would pay the same attention in class not matter what the topic is.

The other participants have a completely different point of view, 29% think their attention would decrease if the syllabus negotiated for their lessons was not of their liking. Among this group, 11% are certain they would focus less if the negotiated syllabus does not meet their interests.

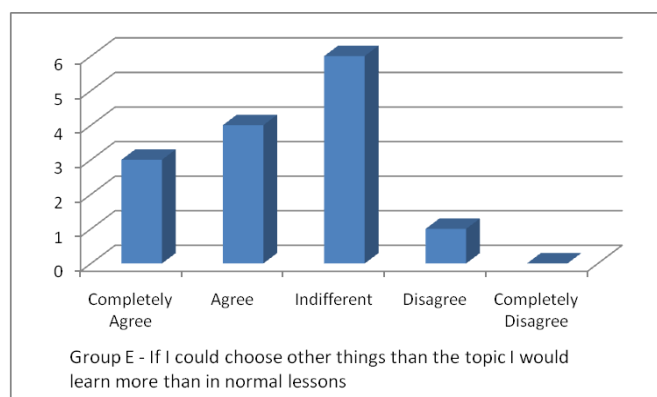
Since group E was the only group to have a negotiated syllabus, its post test differed slightly from group A's with items related specifically to the negotiated syllabus and the students' perceptions of it.



The first question addressed the students' point of view about choosing the topic of the teaching unit and negotiating the syllabus. As the chart shows, the students from group E had a good experience; with all of them liking the experiment I proposed. The only aspect with which I feel slightly discouraged is that only one student out of fourteen (7%) liked it a lot.

The same happens with the second pie chart. When being asked if the lessons with the negotiated syllabus had met the expectations they had before starting, only one student answered s/he was disappointed. The majority of group E (64%) thought the lessons were approximately what they expected and the remaining 29% said the lessons were beyond their expectations.

In both cases the results of the pie charts were heavily influenced by my own performance as a teacher. Therefore this data should not be taken by the reader as representative of the efficiency of the negotiated syllabus and, although I do not recommend exporting it for other papers, it may be a good starting point if any comparison wants to be made with the results obtained by a more experienced teacher.

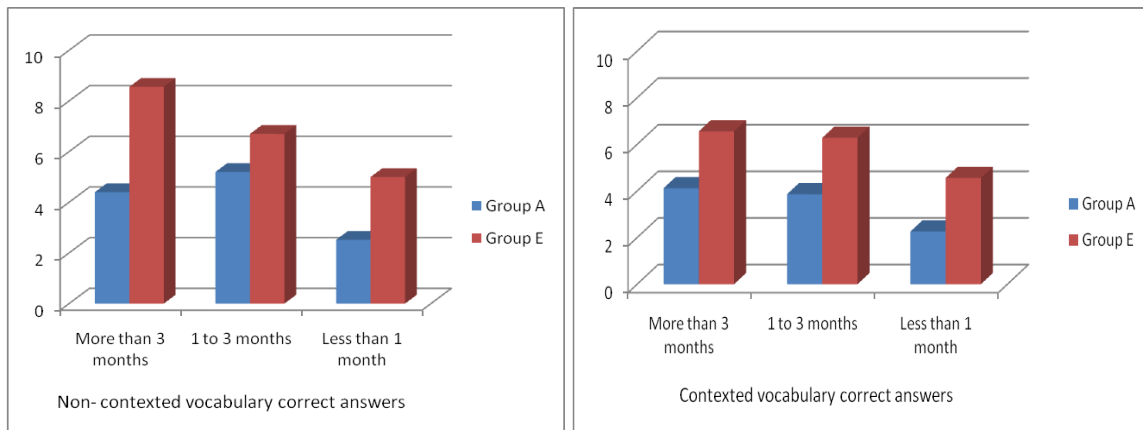


In the last item from group E's questionnaire I wanted to know the participants' opinion about increasing the quantity of things to be negotiated in a syllabus. For this paper I only negotiated with the students the topic of the teaching unit due to time restrictions as well as the increasing difficulty of negotiating more aspects of a syllabus. As the chart shows, 43% of group E thought it does not matter adding more aspects to the negotiation of the syllabus while 7% disagreed to the question. The other 50% of the students agreed in that a more negotiated syllabus would let students learn more, although only 21% agreed completely with the proposed statement.

Vocabulary Section

The vocabulary in the pre test was divided in several parts. First of all, the vocabulary was distributed in that with and without context. Secondly, both the context and the non-context sections had vocabulary the participants were taught at three different moments: less than one month ago, one to three months and lastly some vocabulary that was more than three months old.

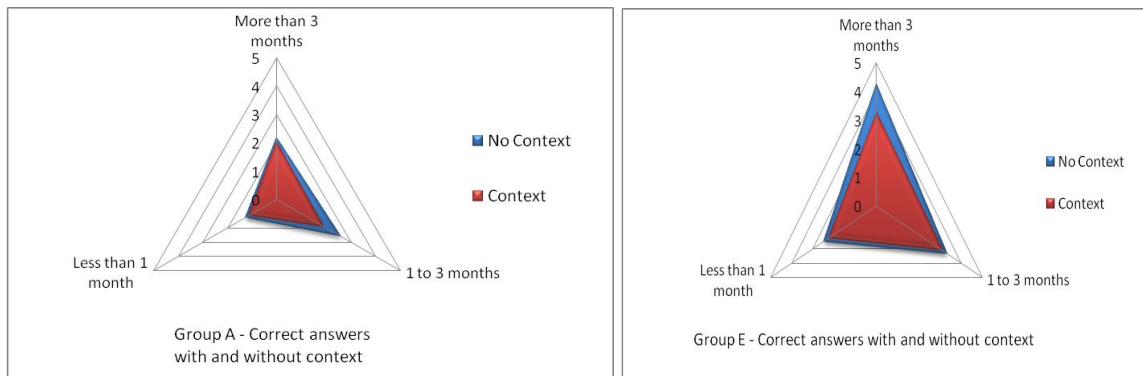
The two graphs from below show the results collected from both group's pre tests in the context and non-context sections. The original values for correct answers were out of 5, but with the purpose of simplifying the graph comprehension to the reader I have changed them to be out of 10 points as in normal examinations.



By looking briefly we can notice there is a significant gap in the number of correct answers between group A and group E for contextualized and non-contextualized vocabulary as well as for the vocabulary taught at any of the three different moments. Besides that, it is also worth mentioning the fact that there seems to be a decreasing pattern by which the sooner the vocabulary was taught in the academic year the higher the marks are. This means that at the beginning of the year, students are very receptive to what teachers say and retain more vocabulary, most likely due to them being relaxed from summer vacation. And as time passes, their level of vocabulary retention decreases steadily as fatigue takes over and final exams come near.

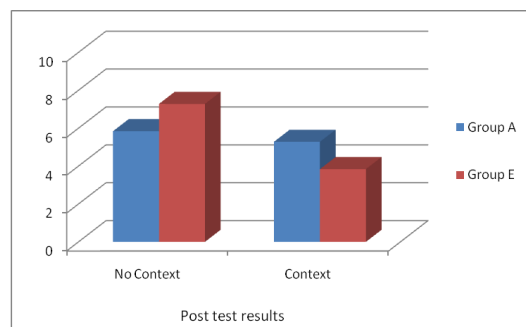
These results were completely unexpected, because when I began to consider my hypothesis I was told group E was academically speaking slower than group A, and therefore I assumed group E's marks would be lower. With this assumption in mind I made the students from group E be the ones who would negotiate their syllabus by choosing the topic of their teaching unit.

I had hoped that at the end of the experiment students from group E would retain more vocabulary than those of group A as a consequence of having a negotiated syllabus. However, since the outcome was out of my calculations and group E did not have to catch up to group A but the opposite, I decided to evaluate if the negotiated syllabus had any influence on the students by comparing, instead of the increase in correct answers, if the gap between both groups widened or not before and after.



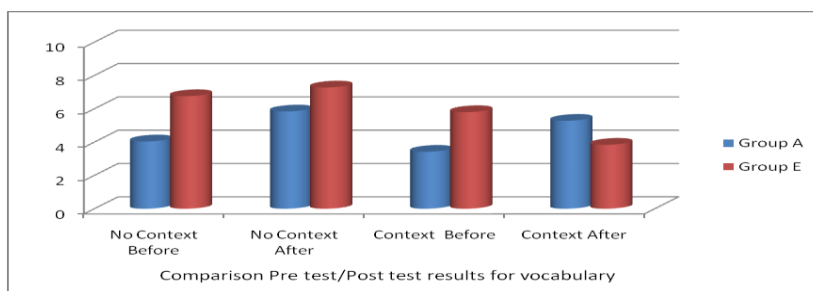
The above graphs show how each group scored in the context and non-context sections. As I stated before, group E's scores were higher than those of group A in every aspect. It is however interesting to see that except for two exceptions (1 to 3 months for group A and more than 3 months for group E), both groups had similar results when the vocabulary was in context and without it.

After analyzing the pre test, I was eager to see what the post test results looked like. But the outcome was once more surprising.



If my hypothesis was correct and the negotiated syllabus is truly helpful for students to learn and retain more vocabulary than normal methodologies, group E should have increased its marks and have the upper hand compared to group A, at least according to Margarita's comment on what group was supposed to be faster. But instead, it had good marks regarding the vocabulary which was presented with no context, but on the other hand its score sunk when it came down to contextualized vocabulary. Meanwhile, group A had obtained the opposite results and without such an abrupt difference in correct answers between the two sections.

The following graph compares the scores of both groups in the pre test and post test for contextualized and non-contextualized vocabulary.



According to it, on the one hand, group E improved its pre test score by 7.69% for vocabulary with no context, but drastically decreased its number of correct answers for contextualized vocabulary by 33.79%. On the other hand, group A had an outstanding growth compared to its previous results. Its members increased their average marks for non contextualized and contextualized vocabulary respectively by 44.55% and 54.38%. Furthermore, the difference in improvement between pre test and post test results for group A is 49% while group E, even though it had negotiated its syllabus, decreased its points by 11.47%.

This data is enough evidence to confirm that in this case the negotiated syllabus did not help students to neither learn nor retain more vocabulary. At the end, students from group E not only were not capable of scoring more points in the post test but actually got less marks than at the beginning.

Weaknesses

1. Group A's syllabus was chosen by their teacher Margarita, but it turned out to be a more motivating topic than the one of an average teaching unit. Source for this motivation is that after finishing this teaching unit about London the students from group A went on a one day trip to this city. In addition, for some of them it was their first time going abroad.

I believe many students focused more on everything that was said during the lessons because they were motivated by the trip, and as a consequence the group's post test results improved brilliantly. It could be said that both groups actually had negotiated syllabuses.

2. In order to design the pre test I needed to know the vocabulary my students had been taught from the beginning of the year. Instead of asking Margarita I thought it would be better to ask the students for their notebooks because she could forget many things, especially if it was something from before Christmas. I asked both groups for their notebooks, but in the two classes many of the students did not have one for this subject. At the end only four students lent me their notebooks in group E and one in group A. In all cases the notes seemed incomplete and their size differed greatly from student to student (in a few cases a years' worth of notes was reduced to one sheet of paper).

The problem this may have created is that, because I had fewer notebooks from group A than from group E, the pre test might have been more advantageous for group E and this could explain the huge difference in the results of group A between pre test and post test. However, when I designed the pre test I tried to avoid this possibility by focusing mainly on the vocabulary that was repeated in the notebooks from the two groups.

3. When I was correcting the vocabulary in the questionnaires I had to make several decisions on what to accept as correct answers. For example, the word demonstration in the pre test was meant to be translated by the students as *manifestación*, but many of them fell for the false friend in Spanish and wrote *demonstración*.

Although at first I thought not to accept *demonstración* as a correct answer I ended up changing my mind because that meaning is accepted by the English Dictionary of Cambridge University, and since the word was written without any context in the questionnaire I could not blame the students for answering with the second meaning of the word, even if it was just luck caused by a false friend.

Another case was that of the word hijacker, where a few students misunderstood it and translated the word as a verb (to hijack/*secuestrar*) or a noun (hijack/*secuestro*). This mistake made me realize I had to establish some criteria for these types of situations where the word in English was clearly recognized but the student failed to translate it. The aim of this paper is to observe how much vocabulary the participants remembered, so I decided the answers had to be completely accurate, otherwise the number of possibilities that could show up while correcting the questionnaires would increase and the validity of the final result would be less valuable.

Conclusion

The negotiated syllabus is a tool used in learner-centered classrooms which can successfully help students get involved and motivated by giving them the power to choose certain aspects of the syllabus. In this paper I used a simplified version of a negotiated syllabus, reducing the teacher-student negotiation only to the topic of the teaching unit. A decision that seems correct since it was said in the *Language Education in Asia* edition that “a strong version of syllabus negotiation is feasible in situations where there is no pre-determined curriculum and all the curricular decisions are open to negotiation in the classroom, a weak form – in which negotiation helps fine-tune a programme – is more practical in contexts where there is a largely pre-set curriculum or where the teacher and students have little experience in negotiation” (Nguyen, 2011, p.72). As far as I am concerned, the negotiated syllabus can be an excellent way to improve the student’s learning experience.

This paper intended to verify whether students learned better after negotiating their syllabus, but in the end the results apparently confirmed otherwise. The sample of students whom I taught showed no clear improvement: according to the raw data, their average in vocabulary recognition decreased slightly as well as their marks for contextualized vocabulary despite the fact that they had a negotiated syllabus. The only palpable growth the participants showed was reduced to non-contextualized vocabulary, and even in this case, the progress was so slim that it was not possible to determine if it was a consequence of negotiating the syllabus or a mere coincidence.

Even if this paper’s results show the opposite, my personal opinion is that the negotiated syllabus is a concept which has the potential to improve learning at the same time it addresses a few aspects that hinder class dynamics such as focus or teacher-student communication.

However, since it has been scarcely put into practice and the number of resources available is still small, teachers who seek something new for their lessons will likely give up on negotiating the syllabus before something which is still unexplored. And the teacher’s confidence is important because the negotiated syllabus’ successful implementation depends greatly on the teacher because s/he is the one who must ensure the way the lesson and the contents are taught do not decrease the student’s motivation and interest on what has been previously negotiated.

Moreover, in learner-centered lessons such as those with a negotiated syllabus, the teacher loses his/her role as the director in order to become the facilitator of the class (Yalden, 1987; Ballman, 1998) or even a peer (Hall, 1999). So as to say, the teacher's performance is the key to have an efficient negotiated syllabus but if s/he fails at this, the teaching unit will still be negotiated and may be better than a non-negotiated unit but will lose its initial advantage regarding student predisposition to English learning.

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