Mohamed Khider University, Biskra
Faculty of Arts and Languages
Department of English

Module: syllabus design
Level: Master II   *Semester One*
Teacher: Dr. SAIHI H.

LECTURE V: Negotiated Syllabus: Towards Learner Autonomy

1. Teachers and Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to the learner's ability to take charge of their own learning. However, autonomy does **not** mean learning without the teacher. Instead, the teacher becomes a **facilitator**, **guide**, and **resource person** who creates conditions that allow learners to make informed decisions about their learning.

In the context of a negotiated syllabus, the teacher:

- Encourages learners to reflect on their needs, goals, and learning styles
- Shares decision-making with learners regarding course content and classroom procedures
- Provides advice and support when learners select tasks, materials, and assessment criteria
- Helps learners gradually assume more responsibility
- Builds a classroom atmosphere based on trust, collaboration, and openness

Teachers therefore play a **central role** in developing learner autonomy by shifting from authority figure to co-participant in the learning process.

2. Learner Autonomy in Curriculum Development

Learner autonomy has become an essential principle in modern curriculum development. Instead of viewing learners as passive recipients of instruction, the negotiated syllabus positions them as **active contributors** to curriculum decisions.

According to Benson (2009, p. 18), autonomous learners are capable of making decisions in several key areas:

2.1. Change in the Learner's Role

Learners take greater responsibility for:

- Selecting homework tasks
- Choosing classroom activities
- Planning small, independent learning projects
- Monitoring their own progress
- Expressing learning preferences and concerns

This helps learners become more self-directed and self-regulated.

2.2. Change in the Teacher's Role

Teachers shift their role from "knowledge transmitter" to:

- Facilitator
- Advisor
- Co-planner
- Supporter of independent learning

This shift gives learners more space to produce language, collaborate, and develop self-confidence.

2.3. Use of a Logbook or Learning Journal

Learners use a logbook to:

- Document learning progress
- Reflect on successes and difficulties
- Set goals and evaluate outcomes
- Record learning that takes place outside the classroom

This tool strengthens reflection and metacognitive awareness.

2.4. Introduction of Authentic Interaction Activities

Activities are selected to:

- Increase meaningful communication
- Encourage creativity and negotiation
- Promote problem-solving and collaboration

Examples include debates, projects, role-plays, surveys, and real-life tasks.

2.5. Learner Evaluation Responsibilities

Learners are encouraged to:

- Evaluate their oral and written performance
- Provide peer feedback
- Assess group work
- Contribute to rubrics and assessment decisions

This reinforces accountability, motivation, and active engagement.

2.6. Consideration of Individual Preferences

Autonomous learning recognizes that learners have:

- Different cognitive styles
- Varying goals and motivations
- Unique backgrounds and experiences
- Preferred learning strategies

These differences should be reflected in the negotiated syllabus.

3. Negotiated Syllabus and Learner Autonomy

A negotiated syllabus is a curriculum approach in which teachers and learners **jointly decide** what should be included in the course. It is directly linked to learner autonomy because it:

- Involves learners in decision-making
- Encourages reflection on needs and goals
- Promotes responsibility and ownership
- Increases motivation and engagement
- Shifts power dynamics in the classroom

Negotiation may occur at different levels, such as:

- Negotiating course objectives
- Negotiating topics and themes
- Negotiating activities and materials
- Negotiating assessment criteria
- Negotiating classroom rules, deadlines, and group formation

When learners help shape the syllabus, they become more invested in learning and more aware of how learning takes place.

4. Principles of the Negotiated Syllabus

Breen and Littlejohn (2000, cited in Nation & Macalister, 2010) identify **situations**

Situations Where Negotiation Is Unavoidable

- **Different backgrounds** among learners and teachers
- **Limited time**, requiring careful choices about what to prioritize
- **Diverse learner groups** with varying needs and proficiency levels
- **No initial needs analysis**, making in-class decision-making necessary
- **No coursebook available**, requiring teacher–learner collaboration
- **Learners' past experiences** must be incorporated
- **Open-ended courses**, where direction emerges over time

These situations make negotiation not just useful, but necessary for effective teaching.

5. Steps in Implementing a Negotiated Syllabus

Nation and Macalister (2010, p. 150) outline the following steps:

5.1 Negotiating Course Elements: Learners and teachers jointly decide on:

- Goals
- Content
- Learning activities and format
- Assessment methods

5.2 Implementing the Negotiated Decisions

The negotiated plan is put into action. This includes:

- Selecting materials
- Designing tasks
- Establishing schedules
- Agreeing on evaluation tools

5.3 Evaluating the Implementation : Evaluation assesses:

- Whether negotiated goals were achieved
- Whether learners were satisfied with the process
- What improvements need to be made
- How negotiation affected learning outcomes

This creates a continuous cycle of improvement.

6. Requirements for a Successful Negotiated Syllabus

Nation and Macalister (2010) identify **six requirements**:

6.1 Negotiation Procedure: Clear guidelines about

- How negotiation will be conducted
- How often it will take place
- What tools will be used (e.g., surveys, discussions, logs)

6.2 Course Planning: Participation : Deciding

- Who participates in which decisions
- How groups will be formed
- How responsibilities will be distributed

6.3 Course Planning: Procedure : Determining

- What kinds of activities will be included

- What methodology will be used
- How tasks will be sequenced

6.4 Course Planning: Learning Goals: Clarifying

- Skills to be developed
- Knowledge areas to be covered
- Learners' personal goals
- Academic and professional needs

6.5 Course Evaluation : Continual evaluation of

- Previous decisions
- Materials used
- Task effectiveness
- Learner satisfaction

6.6 Resources and Materials : Ensuring

- Access to diverse learning materials
- Authentic resources
- Opportunities for learner-selected materials