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978-0-521-66192-8 - Classroom Decision-Making: Negotiation and Process Syllabuses in Practice

Edited by Michael P. Breen and Andrew Littlejohn

Excerpt

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1 The significance of negotiation

Michael P. Breen and Andrew Littlejohn

In this chapter, we explore the origins, rationale and nature of negotiated work in a language classroom, setting the scene for the practical accounts which follow. We will principally be concerned therefore with three sets of questions:

1. What is negotiation? Which particular form of negotiation is the focus of this book?
2. What are the justifications for negotiating with students in a language class? What is the rationale for negotiation?
3. Which classroom decisions may be negotiable? How does negotiation relate to a process syllabus?

Although these issues are related to one another, we will explore them in turn in the three sections that follow. As we shall see, the broader concept of ‘negotiation’ is rather like a river, arising from a variety of small streams and gathering its own momentum eventually to pour in quite different directions over a flood plain. Its theoretical sources are diverse. As it has attracted greater interest in terms of its relevance to research and practice, it has become more defined and differentiated so that it no longer has a single meaning. As this book focuses upon only one of these meanings, it is important to clarify from the outset what we intend by the term and how it is implemented in practice by the contributors to this collection. Building on this initial definition, we will then elaborate upon negotiation in the classroom in more detail by tracing some of the influences that have shaped it and by enumerating the main principles underlying its role in language pedagogy in particular. Finally, we will address certain practical implications for classroom decision-making by describing the relationship between negotiation and a process syllabus in the context of a language course or curriculum. In this chapter, therefore, the focus is upon the theory or philosophy of negotiation as a preliminary to teachers’ accounts of its practical application in Chapters 2 to 17. In Chapter 18, we will draw theory and practice together in deducing what may be learned from both.

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Forms of negotiation

Negotiation typifies and generates the ways we communicate through written or spoken texts. We can distinguish three kinds of negotiation in terms of the main purposes they serve in particular contexts of communication. We may call these personal, interactive and procedural negotiation. All three involve a struggle for meaning and all three entail the reduction of our uncertainty during learning or communication – both psychological uncertainty and, to differing extents, social or interpersonal uncertainty. All three are related and can co-occur.

Personal negotiation

Personal negotiation is primarily a psychological process because it engages such mental capacities as discriminating, analysing and synthesising, memorising or recalling, and so on. When we interpret meaning from what we read or hear, negotiation occurs between the potential meanings of the written or spoken text and those meanings which we ourselves can attribute to that text from our previous knowledge and experience (Widdowson, 1978). For example, we are all familiar with the experience of ‘gaining’ more meaning than we had given previously to a novel or a poem when we read it a second time and with our inclination to superimpose our own interpretations upon items in a news broadcast. Such interpretative negotiation is likely to result in different meanings being derived from the same text by different people. Similarly, when we express meaning in what we write or say, we have to negotiate between what we intend to mean and our knowledge of the forms of expression which the rules and conventions of writing and speaking will allow. In certain situations, we are well aware of the frustrations of struggling for the right word or form of expression, whilst we are likely to be most conscious of this mental negotiation when we are trying to write something which we want to make very clear.

Negotiation in this sense therefore refers to the unobservable and complex mental processing that occurs in our search for understanding and our efforts to be understood. This kind of negotiation underlies all the negotiating we do. Meaning is made in our heads, although, of course, the meanings we interpret and express are likely to have been learned in previous social activities and can be regarded as having their roots in the cultural and social worlds which we inhabit. The second two kinds of negotiation are motivated by this mental process and, in turn, serve to influence it in an ongoing way. If we seek meaning through language, personal negotiation is unavoidable whilst interactive

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and procedural negotiation are always optional and located in overt social activity.

Interactive negotiation

The original use of the term ‘negotiation’ in the sense we refer to it here derives from researchers investigating the nature of conversational interaction (Garfinkel, 1967). Here the negotiation is overtly social and occurs when people use language either to indicate their understanding or their failure to understand (or, indeed, believe) what another person has said, or in order to modify and restructure their language to make things clearer so that they will be understood. The significance of this for language learning was originally recognised by Evelyn Hatch when she explored how learning might actually *derive* from the kinds of interaction in which learners may be involved (Hatch, 1978). This radical departure from the accepted view that the capacity to communicate was an outcome of the necessary *prior and explicit* learning of the forms of language coincided with Krashen’s influential argument that language acquisition primarily depends upon the provision to learners of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981; 1985).

In representing a synthesis of Hatch’s assertion of the importance of conversation and Krashen’s assertion of the centrality of appropriate input, M. Long identified the interactive process as pivotal for language acquisition. He elaborated upon the interaction in which a listener requests clarification of someone else’s message and the speaker subsequently repeats, simplifies or elaborates upon the original message as the location in which teachers and learners seek and create comprehensible input (M. Long, 1981). He was encouraged in this view by his and others’ discovery that this kind of modified interaction occurred more frequently when native speakers communicated with non-native speakers and even more frequently when non-native speakers communicated with each other, particularly in language learning tasks. Debates on the relative contributions of input and interaction have characterised much of second language acquisition (SLA) research since the mid-1970s. Long and other researchers who acknowledged the centrality of conversational interaction in SLA later adopted the term ‘negotiation’ to describe it and, more recently, specified it as ‘negotiation for meaning’ (for a review of this work, see Pica, 1994). Interactive negotiation, therefore, occurs in an ongoing and usually spontaneous way within immediate social activity. From the perspective of language acquisition research, however, it also has a psycholinguistic purpose in that it is seen as a facilitative means for generating comprehensible input.

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The primary function of personal and interactive negotiation is to uncover and share meaning. Like interactive negotiation, whilst it is also overt and social in nature, the primary focus of procedural negotiation is less upon meaning than upon reaching agreement. Although both understanding and sharing meaning are entailed in the process, these are subordinate to the main aim of procedural negotiation. This kind of negotiation is exemplified by discussions between people who are likely to have different interests or different points of view but who seek to reach agreement on a matter, solve a shared problem or establish ways of working that are acceptable to them. This view of negotiation is probably the interpretation that is used most in everyday usage, and it is regularly used to refer to what diplomats, or trade unions and employers do when differences between various parties arise.

Its relevance to language learning arises because, for many people, such learning occurs in the social context of a classroom. Here, the primary function of procedural negotiation is managing teaching and learning as a group experience. There are certain key decisions which have to be made within this process. These include: who will work with whom, in what ways, with what resources and for how long, upon what subject matter or problem, and for what purposes. In other words, decisions have to be made with regard to the purposes of the work, its particular focus or content, and the ways in which it will be undertaken in the classroom group. In addition, we need to know the extent to which the actual decisions made have been appropriate in enabling the achievement of the chosen objectives. Outcomes from the process have to be evaluated in some way. Conventionally, it is assumed that it is the role of the teacher to make these decisions, both covertly as part of planning and classroom management and through overt instructions to students at key moments in a lesson. As we see in the next part of this chapter, there are several justifications for raising such decisions to the level of overt negotiation *with* students. However, one major justification echoes what we identified as the motivations for both personal and interactive negotiation: reaching and sharing understanding.

We can exemplify this motive in classroom language learning with reference to the common situation of a teacher having to lead students through a pre-designed syllabus which entails specific learning objectives. The teacher has to mediate between the requirements of the syllabus and the different learning agendas of the students in the class. These diverse personal agendas are shaped by the students' prior knowledge and experience, including their earlier experiences of classroom learning. Learning agendas comprise the learners' own learning

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priorities, their changing learning needs, their different preferred strategies and styles of learning, the different value and functions they give to the language classroom and the people in it, and so on. Such agendas inevitably generate a wide range of interpretations – some of which are unconscious – of the objectives of learning and appropriate content. Similarly, there are a range of preferred ways of learning and differences in how people think they should work in a classroom setting. However, the teacher often has to navigate all the students through a set syllabus towards specific objectives. To achieve this, and responding to emerging learner needs and difficulties, the teacher is the person who most often makes decisions of the kind we identified earlier. The result is the *actual* syllabus of the classroom which is an unfolding compromise between the original pre-designed syllabus and the individual teacher's alertness to those aspects of learner agendas that may be revealed during classroom work.

The teacher's interpretation of a syllabus and reasons for classroom decisions are usually covert. Similarly, learners' own unfolding interpretations of what is done in the classroom and how it relates to their own learning agendas are rarely the focus of overt consideration. Just as the compromise syllabus is essentially the teacher's creation, so it is also differentially interpreted by the students, and it is unlikely to accommodate the more opaque aspects of the diverse language learning agendas of the classroom group. The result is likely to be a lack of harmony between the different versions of syllabuses in the class that, in turn, has the potential to inhibit, disrupt or delay the learning process.

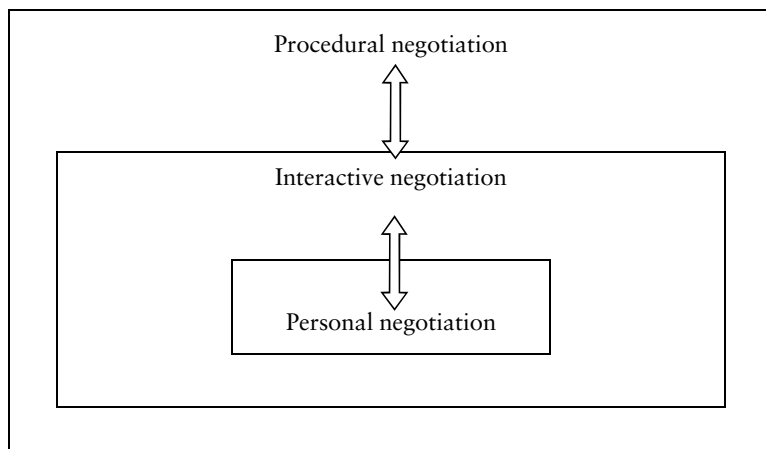
A major purpose of procedural negotiation in the classroom is, therefore, to reach a shared understanding at appropriate moments in classroom work of both the requirements that may be implicit in, for example, an external syllabus or the teacher's experientially informed view of efficient ways of working and the different learning agendas in the class. Through this ongoing process of explicit accommodation, a collective language curriculum of the classroom group can be gradually evolved. Procedural negotiation in the language classroom comprises overt and shared decision-making through which alternative assumptions and interpretations are made clear, the range of achievements and difficulties in the work are identified, and preferences and alternatives in ways of working can be revealed and chosen so that the teaching-learning process within a class can be as effective as possible. *It is this kind of procedural negotiation and the practical experiences of it that is the focus of this book and which defines the nature of a process syllabus.*

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Although we have emphasised the potential contribution of procedural negotiation to the language classroom, all three forms of negotiation which we have identified are highly relevant for language learning. Learners must engage in personal negotiation as a psychological process in order to learn to interpret and express meaning in a new language. If given appropriate scope to occur, interactive negotiation (sharing, checking and clarifying meanings) and procedural negotiation (reaching agreement on decisions) will be part of the communicative and social activity of a language class. Also, and importantly, all three are related. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, the relationship is one of interactivity and entailment. Procedural negotiation entails interactive negotiation for meaning; the search for agreement in decisions requires the resolution of failures to understand or the struggle to be clear. Interactive negotiation is motivated by the wish to interpret personally what is said or express a particular point of view. We can also describe the process in reverse, where the personal struggle to express meaning, for example, is likely to entail noticing when one is not understood and the consequent effort to reformulate or elaborate on one's meaning. Such interactive work will occur in an ongoing and spontaneous way while seeking agreement in relation to a decision about classroom work.

A major significance of procedural negotiation for the language classroom is that it calls upon and activates both personal and interactive negotiation while, in turn, contributing to their scope and quality

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during learning. All three are mutually supportive processes for developing the capacity to communicate in a new language.

In identifying procedural negotiation of classroom decisions as the particular focus of this book, we have so far emphasised two of its purposes. First, when language learning is undertaken in a classroom group, negotiation is a means for developing a harmonious relationship between three teaching–learning agendas: any external requirements upon the learning in terms of pre-specified knowledge and capabilities, individual learning agendas and the evolving collective curriculum of the group. Second, procedural negotiation entails and engages personal and interactive negotiation as processes for the expression of meanings and the sharing of understandings. All three kinds of negotiation underlie and refine a person’s use of language. When we consider the learning of a language, we readily recognise that personal and interactive negotiation are essential. A central argument here is that one of the major purposes of procedural negotiation in a language class is to intensify opportunities for the enactment of personal and interactive negotiation. There are, however, additional and deeper justifications for negotiated decision-making of this kind which we explore in the next section.

The rationale for negotiation

In this section, we present a number of key principles on which negotiation in the language classroom rests. These principles have a long history and express a range of motivations for negotiation with students in classroom settings. We begin, however, with a brief account of influences from theory, research and practice that have shaped them.

The roots of the concept of negotiation in learning

It is not too grandiose a claim to suggest that the direct engagement of students in their learning through democratic decision-making has its roots in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism. The original concept of liberalism, becoming enacted in the gradual spread of democratic forms of government subsequent to the French Revolution, has since been colonised and thereby distorted by state and corporate capitalism – as has the word ‘democracy’ which, in our own times, is often appealed to on behalf of policies and actions of the powerful that are the least democratic. However, the principles of classical liberalism informed what Bertrand Russell identified as ‘the humanist conception’ of social development in the first part of the twentieth century. Both Russell in Europe and John Dewey in the USA explored the

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relationships between an emergent democratic society and an educational enterprise that might give rise to democratic citizenship.

Russell saw education as a means for asserting values over domination and compliance and, crucially, as a means for developing a wise and creative citizenry of a free community to replace the more inequalitarian and dehumanising features of the industrial revolution (B. Russell, 1926). Dewey, writing on education mainly in the years of the Great Depression of the 1930s coincident with the rise of dictatorships in Europe, asserted a humanist conception of education in the context of what he saw as a real struggle for genuine democracy. The expansion of corporate industrial power represented to him, an evolved form of feudal and elitist social structure that classical liberalism had sought to replace. He saw education in the twentieth century as the means towards freedom and independence in thought and action within a co-operative venture towards common goals for the good of the majority rather than a plutocratic minority. And he believed that the educational process should encourage open-mindedness, wholehearted involvement and, significantly, a sense of responsibility to oneself and the wider community (Dewey, 1933; 1938).

The wellspring of these proposals within a humanist conception of education, virtually choked by the horrendous divisions of the Second World War and the subsequent 'Cold War' between western interests and those of state communism, later came to the surface in two distinct streams of theory and research. The first emerged in the work of psychologists who asserted a perspective on human beings as more active agents in their own learning than behaviourism had allowed. The second, coinciding with the significant cultural innovations of the 1960s, emerged in the critical assessments of dominant models of western education by a large number of writers. These streams of influence touched upon or anticipated significant developments in linguistics which were to have a later impact upon both research in second language learning and upon language pedagogy.

The innovations in the psychology of learning were exemplified by the work of George Kelly, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers in the 1950s and 1960s. Kelly based his influential notions regarding how we conceptualise our world through personal constructs on the view that all learning is analogous to scientific investigation and the construction of empirically or, more precisely, experientially informed theories (Kelly, 1955). A central idea in his view was that we learn, not by forming habits of behaviour or accumulating wisdom as it is presented to us, but when confronted with discontinuity, puzzles or paradoxes. We best learn at moments when we *must* reduce our own uncertainty. Maslow and Rogers, reflecting a strong focus on the individual that exemplified

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western psychology, somewhat misleadingly interpreted humanism primarily in terms of a 'person-centred' agenda for 'self-actualisation' through education. In most thoroughly exploring the facilitative role of the teacher within such an agenda, Rogers directly addressed the power and control relations that he saw as existing in 'conventional' education (Rogers, 1969). He envisioned teachers as providing the 'psychological climate' in which learners are able to take responsible control over their own learning. Although identifying power and control as located in interpersonal relations, he did not extend his vision to broader political and social action. This wider perspective would arise later from other sources, mainly European. However, Rogers, like Maslow, argued for a reduction of emphasis upon content-based and fixed-learning outcomes in favour of opening up a space for learners' diversity in learning needs and objectives through a focus upon the process or experience of learning which could be seen as generative and of life-long value. These 'humanistic' perspectives were carried through in certain new directions in language teaching in the 1970s, particularly in the USA exemplified by Moskovitz (1978) and the innovations described by Stevick (1976; 1990). However, as we shall see, another critic of the behaviourist constructs of human learning was to have a significant, though perhaps indirect, impact upon second language teaching.

Meantime, of even more long-term significance for the roots of procedural negotiation in the classroom, and coincident with the growing civil-rights movement, more overtly critical perspectives on the inequalities and divisiveness of contemporary American education were being identified in the work of Holt (1964), Kohl (1968) and Kozol (1967), among others. Their demands for school reform were expressed in terms of the urgent need for more socially inclusive and explicitly democratic forms of pedagogy and curricula (Postman and Weingartner, 1969). Dewey's original agenda was being rewritten at a time when his predictions about the underlying inequalities of American society were being more widely acknowledged.

Educators outside the USA were, meantime, widening this debate. Ivan Illich (1971) asserted that conventional schooling had gone beyond redemption not least because it served the interests of power and wealth in its construction of compliant consuming citizens. Like Russell before him, Illich asserted the need for a return to 'vernacular values' and he identified these as being rooted in community endeavour that was typified by authentic democracy. Paulo Freire's work, primarily in adult literacy in Latin America, similarly located emancipatory education within local cultural action and proposed worthwhile learning as essentially an outcome of social collaboration (Freire, 1970; 1972). Recently, Freire's ideas in particular have been taken up most directly in

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relation to language teaching through Auerbach's proposals concerning a participatory pedagogy (Auerbach, 1990; 1995; see also Wolfe-Quintero, Chapter 17 of this volume).

In Britain, echoing Russell's and Dewey's liberal democratic agenda for the schooling of young people with an emphasis upon collaborative responsibility rather than competition, and choice rather than coercion, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a range of practical initiatives within mainstream, state schooling. These included the Plowden Committee's learning-centred agenda for primary education (Plowden, 1967) and the establishment of the first comprehensive high schools intended to replace the binary division between grammar schools (which selected their intake on the basis of seeming academic potential) and secondary schools (for all other students). Both these initiatives attracted strong resistance at the time and ever since from more conservative circles. Coincident with such innovation was a growing interest in less conservative circles in alternative forms of schooling, perhaps most notably in A. S. Neill's Summerhill in which he had transformed liberal views of education into practice thirty years previously, at a time when Russell's and Dewey's ideas were still relatively new (Neill, 1937; 1962; Hennings, 1972).

More liberal directions in practice coincided with critical explorations in theory. Detailed analyses of the transmission of knowledge in schooling in terms of an asymmetry of power and its implications for control in the teaching–learning process were undertaken by a number of British sociologists of education (for example, Bernstein, 1967; Young, 1971). In terms of curriculum innovation, the tenor of this debate in Britain was, perhaps, most accessibly articulated in Lawrence Stenhouse's work (Stenhouse, 1975). In the same climate of critical evaluation, and echoing Bernstein's ideas regarding access to, and control of, knowledge, Douglas Barnes and his co-writers challenged prevailing transmission modes of education with specific reference to the language used in schools and classrooms (Barnes *et al.*, 1969). This remarkable critique initiated a focus among educators upon language across the whole curriculum and anticipated Britten's assertion of the need to see students as active communicating participants rather than quiet spectators in schooling, and Barnes' exploration of small group processes as a means for genuinely interpretative learning. Later advocates of direct student participation through their negotiation of aspects of curriculum, particularly aspects relating to language and literacy, have often cited the work of these authors as highly influential (see, for example, Boomer *et al.*, 1992).

This remarkable upsurge of ideas and action of the 1960s and 1970s flows more recently into the assertively critical work on education in