



Incorporating the Negotiated Syllabus in ESP Classrooms: Attitudes of Doctoral Students at the University of 8 May 1945, Guelma

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Abstract:

The negotiated syllabus emerged as an alternative to the pre-determined syllabus. It is a co-constructed syllabus that allows for more flexibility in teaching English for Specific Purposes. In this regard, the current research aims to measure doctoral students' attitudes towards negotiating the syllabus in ESP. The quantitative approach is adopted by administering a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to 18 doctoral students in the Faculty of Economic, Commercial and Management Sciences. Statistics indicated that students have a positive attitude towards syllabus negotiation in ESP. Nearly all the questionnaire items received a high agreement with a mean that ranges from 4.11 to 4.55, and a standard deviation that is between 0.16 and 0.56. The study highly recommends ESP syllabus negotiation particularly through the inclusion of AI tools.

Keywords: *AI tools; English for Specific Purposes; ESP; Negotiated syllabus; Pre-determined syllabus; Syllabus negotiation.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Before the emergence of the Communicative Approach, syllabus designers were interested in product-oriented syllabi rather than process-oriented ones. The structural syllabus with its focus on form and grammar dominated language teaching for years. The shift towards the notional-functional as well as the communicative syllabus has revolutionized language teaching enormously. It has directed teaching towards individualized instruction and specification of authentic learning objectives that are pertinent to real-life contexts. Accordingly, promoting students' communicative competence necessitated the adoption of process-oriented syllabi. Eventually, the process syllabus was first introduced by Breen in 1984 to refer to how something is done. It is the result of learners' continuous creation which can be done at any step of teaching (Breen, 1984). Within the process approach to syllabus design, the negotiated syllabus emerged as an opportunity for learners to take part in decision-making. In other words, the negotiated syllabus indicates learner-teacher collaboration in choosing the content (Brown, 2012).

Negotiation is an ongoing process since learners can discuss any modification needed in the syllabus as well as the ways of its implementation. Accordingly, this process is always subject to change on the basis of teacher's observation and continuous informal conversation with learners. The goal behind negotiating the syllabi of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is raising learners' engagement and self-direction, in addition to making them active participants in the learning process. Effective negotiation can result in increasing learners' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses through self-assessment and self-reflection. Hence, negotiating the content of ESP courses is an influential strategy that can lead to higher academic achievement. However, many ESP teachers are sticking to traditional pre-determined syllabi by imposing the content on the learners without listening to their voice. Consequently, many learners feel disengaged and not interested since the syllabus content does not match their needs. The aim behind the current research is to measure ESP doctoral students' attitudes towards negotiating the syllabus with the teacher. Within this scope, this research addresses the following research question:

Do doctoral students have a positive attitude towards syllabus negotiation in ESP?

I. Literature Review

1.1. The Negotiated Syllabus

The negotiated syllabus is a learner-centred approach that emerged within the process-oriented approach to syllabus design. Unlike the predetermined syllabus, the negotiated syllabus focuses on learners' needs; thus, it can raise their motivation and involvement. It is a syllabus in which teachers collaborate with learners by listening to their choices and creating the content together. The negotiated syllabus is referred to as *student voice* which is a pedagogical movement that indicates a shift in control and responsibility from teachers to students (Cook-Sather, 2002). It is also called *co-constructed syllabus* as teachers and learners construct it together. When the learners design their own syllabus, they will not be merely viewed as passive receivers of knowledge, but rather as knowledge creators.

Negotiation is categorized into three types: personal, interactive, and procedural. Personal negotiation is the employment of cognitive abilities in information processing. Interactive negotiation is to show understanding or non-understanding during communication. Procedural negotiation is to discuss ways of content organization (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

Furthermore, syllabus negotiation is a cyclical process that includes the following elements in the first stage: goals, content, and ways of implementation. In the second stage, it proceeds to the application of the shared decisions. In the last stage, it ends in evaluating the application. Then, modification is made whenever needed (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). *Covert negotiation* is differentiated from *overt negotiation*. The former is done secretly and indirectly by the teacher, while the latter implies that the teacher asks the learners to share their opinions openly (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Effective negotiation is beneficial for both teachers and learners as it fosters teachers' pedagogical competence and raises learners' responsibility for learning. Other merits of the negotiated syllabus include: agency, authenticity, collaboration, relevance, and democracy. Firstly, learners become active agents who participate in designing syllabus content. Secondly, authenticity is the result of choosing a syllabus that reflects the real world. Thirdly, collaboration is stimulated by participating in decision-making. Fourthly, relevance is ensured as learners choose the issues they are interested in. Finally, democracy reflects learners' freedom to express themselves through participation in decision-making (Edwards, 2011). Several factors contribute to facilitating syllabus negotiation. The most important factor is promoting personal relations with learners based on debates and formative feedback related to the course. Planning tutorial sessions is also effective when it takes into consideration learners' feedback and suggestions (Edwards, 2011). However, the implementation of the negotiated syllabus can be restricted due to many obstacles like large-size groups (Clarke, 1991). In this case, the teacher will have different levels and a large number of students, which complicates the process of needs' analysis. In this respect, teachers would better use automatic needs' analysis.

1.2. Teaching ESP through the Negotiated Syllabus

Teaching ESP centers around investigating learners' needs and objectives related to a specific field. ESP teachers focus on specific language that includes a special repertoire of words which is often vocational in nature (MacKay & Mountford, 1978). Accordingly, ESP is viewed as a whole approach to language learning in which both teachers and learners act as active participants to specify content according to learners' needs. ESP courses are characterized by three factors: authentic materials' use, goal-oriented, and self-direction (Carver, 1983). Teachers have to use authentic materials that reflect real world situations after setting the objectives. Self-direction is important for both teachers and learners. Within this scope, the teachers' syllabus cannot satisfy the ESP learners' needs when it is imposed on the learner; therefore, a more flexible syllabus is needed in ESP, which is called *the learner syllabus* or *the process syllabus* (Breen, 1984). Inevitably, the negotiated syllabus emerged as an alternative way of teaching.

Numerous studies proved the positive influence of the negotiated syllabus on language skills: reading comprehension (Pakdaman, Alibakhshi, & Baradaran, 2021), writing (Abbasian & Malardi, 2013), speaking (Abbasian & Seyed-Hendi, 2011). Other studies focused on the impact of negotiating the syllabus on increasing motivation and autonomy, as well as reducing anxiety (Pakdaman, Alibakhshi, & Baradaran, 2022). However, only few studies investigated syllabus negotiation in ESP. Two quasi-experiments were conducted in 2019 and 2021 successively to investigate the increase of Iranian ESP learners' reading comprehension and autonomy through the negotiated syllabus. They concluded that negotiating the syllabus have a positive effect on ESP learners' reading comprehension

(Peyvandi, Azarnoosh, & Siyyari, 2019) and autonomy (Peyvandi, Azarnoosh, & Siyyari, 2021). Hence, this research tries to fill in the gap of the literature in relation to this issue. Eventually, negotiating the syllabus can be a good initiative by the teacher to share responsibility with learners in the foreign language classroom.

II. Methods and Materials:

1.1. Population of the Study

Negotiation is driven by many causes (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). The following three main causes were chosen, among other reasons mentioned by Breen and Littlejohn, as they are suitable for the researcher's case study:

-The group is not homogeneous: the sample includes 18 doctoral students who are enrolled in different departments: economics, commerce, and management. They also have different levels of English proficiency. As a result the sample is not homogeneous, which makes negotiating the syllabus an obligatory matter to meet the needs of each speciality.

-Textbooks are not available: no textbook is designed to teach ESP in Algeria and there is no syllabus imposed by the ministry. Consequently, the teacher has the freedom to choose the syllabus that fits the needs of his/her students. Thus, the negotiated syllabus was selected to include students in decision-making.

-The course is exploratory in nature: teachers are not trained to teach ESP. they do not know much about the speciality. Hence, the researcher will explore the course with students to reach the specified objectives.

1.2. Research Method and Tools

This research was conducted through the descriptive method by administering a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The Likert scale was created by Likert in 1932 as an effective tool to measure attitudes and collect quantitative data in order to increase research reliability and validity (Likert, 1932). The questionnaire includes fifteen (15) items that aim at surveying doctoral students' opinions and degree of agreement after the implementation of the negotiated syllabus. The process of negotiation started in the first session by asking students to write down their needs, learning objectives, and areas of focus. Then, the teacher checked students' papers and summarized their needs and objectives to be discussed in the second and subsequent sessions.

III. Results and discussion :

In the first session, students were asked to write down their needs and aims in ESP. The main aims, as depicted by learners, are summarized as follows:

- Raising grammatical competence.
- Enriching technical vocabulary.
- Writing a good article in English (they usually use Arabic for publication).
- Writing a good conference paper in English.
- Speaking English fluently and accurately.
- Enhancing listening comprehension.

It was observed that not all the aims are related to ESP as some aims are about General English. Hence, grammar, speaking, and listening were taught through ESP texts. Taking into consideration learners' needs, a syllabus was designed based on the students' suggestions. After the implementation of the syllabus, learners' attitudes towards 15 items related to the

issue of negotiation were measured. The aim was to assess the degree of learners' agreement on the items. Results are indicated in the following table:

Table (1): The Mean and the Standard Deviation of Questionnaire's Items

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD	x	Mean	SD
Teacher-learner collaboration is needed to make decisions about ESP syllabus design.	45	36	0	0	0	81	4.5	0.81
ESP syllabus needs a continuous modification and adjustment because of changing needs during the academic year.	35	44	0	0	0	79	4.38	0.32
The negotiated syllabus is very important in ESP since it helps the learners meet their needs.	35	44	0	0	0	79	4.38	0.32
The negotiated syllabus plays a central role in the process of needs' analysis.	10	64	0	0	0	74	4.11	0.88
The PhD learner is able to decide how ESP is learned efficiently.	10	40	3	10	0	63	3.5	3.55
When students have different specialities, the teacher should negotiate the syllabus with students to meet their needs.	25	52	0	0	0	77	4.27	0.16
The teacher should ask ESP learners about the content to be taught as there is no syllabus that is designed by the ministry or the university.	40	36	3	0	0	79	4.38	0.32
The negotiated syllabus is a learner-centred syllabus which is better than teacher-centred syllabus since it fosters learners' autonomy and independence.	20	56	0	0	0	76	4.22	0.4
Designing an ESP syllabus through negotiation reflects both teachers' and learners' autonomy and self-reliance.	35	44	0	0	0	79	4.38	0.32
The focus in a Doctoral ESP course should be directed mainly to reading/writing articles and conference papers because ESP teachers should be aware of the answer to this question : what do ESP Doctoral students need English for ?	50	24	3	2	0	79	4.38	0.32
ESP learners feel more involved when the content is related to their PhD speciality.	45	36	0	0	0	81	4.5	0.81
Technical vocabulary plays a central role in understanding ESP texts. Hence, teachers should focus on enriching technical vocabulary.	35	36	6	0	0	77	4.27	0.16
Technical vocabulary knowledge could be enhanced through different tasks and activities such as : fill-in-the-gaps activities.	35	44	0	0	0	79	4.38	0.32
Problems in ESP writing are mainly due to lack of General English proficiency (mainly grammar and general vocabulary).	40	40	0	0	0	80	4.44	0.56
Students should have an acceptable/basic grammatical and lexical knowledge before studying ESP; otherwise, they will face problems in academic writing (articles' writing).	55	24	3	0	0	82	4.55	1.05

As shown in Table (1), students' agreement continuum ranges from *Strongly Agree* (SA) to *Strongly Disagree* (SD). Numerical values were assigned as follows: Strongly agree =5; agree =4; neither agree nor disagree =3; disagree =2; strongly disagree =1. The obtained data was treated at the interval level by using descriptive statistics. Hence, both the mean and Standard Deviation (SD) were counted to investigate the degree of agreement and responses' variability as well as the consistency of the values. Most of the items received a high agreement with a mean that ranges generally from 4.11 to 4.55. Measurement of the SD suggested a high agreement for the majority of items (2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14) as SD ranged from 0.16 to 0.56 in relation to these items. A moderate agreement was indicated for the SD of items 1, 4, and 11, which ranged from 0.81 to 0.88. Conversely, a low agreement was observed for item 15 (SD=1.05) that received one participants' disagreement on relating high academic writing to a considerable/basic knowledge of grammar and lexis before studying ESP. A very low agreement was perceived for item 5 (SD=3.55) where scores variability was very high with a mean of 3.5 due to the neutral response patterns and the 'Disagree' option.

Concerning high agreement on the questionnaire items, the participants agreed on the fact that ESP syllabus design is an ongoing process that always needs modification and update with a mean of 4.38. This is confirmed by Breen and Littlejohn (2000) who considered negotiation as a cyclical process. Furthermore, the informants maintained that syllabus negotiation is an important process (mean=4.38) that is needed because of students' different specialties (mean=4.27) and absence of the ministry's syllabus in ESP (mean=4.38). This aligns with Breen and Littlejohn's idea (2000) that negotiation is an obligation when the group is heterogeneous and when there is no specified syllabus by the ministry. Moreover, participants stressed the importance of negotiating the syllabus to increase both teachers' and students' autonomy and self-direction. Thus, the results are similar to those indicated by Peyvandi et al. (2021) in their study about increasing autonomy through the negotiated syllabus. Respondents to the questionnaire agreed that the most important goal of an ESP course is reading and writing articles and conference papers (mean=4.38) since teachers are aware that the main aim of ESP is not teaching General English. They further agreed that technical vocabulary plays a crucial role in ESP (mean=4.27). Hence, it is stated that teachers have to focus on technical vocabulary related to ESP learners' PhD speciality by implementing different tasks and activities that can enrich it (mean=4.38). Significantly, major problems in ESP writing are related to limited general English proficiency that is mainly due to lack of grammatical and lexical competence (mean=4.44).

Concerning moderate agreement on the items, participants agreed with a mean of 4.5 that negotiation is a collaborative process to discuss ESP syllabus design together on the basis of classroom discussions between teachers and learners vis-à-vis the intended objectives and needs. The main result of collaboration is that learners will become decision-makers as confirmed by Nation and Macalister (2010). The informants admitted that the negotiated syllabus is central in the process of needs' analysis (mean=4.11). They agreed on the essential role of negotiation in increasing engagement when the content is related to PhD specialty (mean=4.5).

Concerning low agreement on the items, informants acknowledged that basic knowledge of General English (mainly grammar and general vocabulary) is needed before studying ESP with a mean of 4.55 and a Standard Deviation of 1.05. In this respect, it is proclaimed by Chen that grammar is needed in teaching ESP (Chen, 2016). Skenderi and Ejupi (2018) too stressed the importance of including grammar activities when teaching ESP. It is argued that general vocabulary should be taught before technical vocabulary (Costealinu, 2019). If learners do not have grammatical competence and general vocabulary, they will face many obstacles in understanding ESP and writing ESP articles. Item 5 received a very low agreement with a mean of 3.5 and a standard deviation of 3.55. This indicates participants' disagreement on the fact that the ESP learner is able to decide how ESP is learned efficiently, which mismatches the principles of the learner-centered approach as well as self-direction and constructivism. An ESP learner is supposed to know his/her needs, objectives, and how to achieve them.

IV. Conclusion:

The current research sheds light on the importance of the negotiated syllabus and the necessity of its implementation in ESP classrooms. It aims at measuring doctoral students' attitudes towards syllabus negotiation. After the implementation of the negotiated syllabus with 18 doctoral students, their attitudes were measured through a five-point Likert scale

questionnaire. Quantitative data analysis confirmed the idea that ESP doctoral students have a positive attitude towards syllabus negotiation as it incorporates their voice and ensures their engagement in the ESP course. The study highly recommends the learners' inclusion in decision-making through encouraging self-assessment of the needs. This can be done by utilizing AI assistants and electronic authentic resources and technologies. More importantly, teachers can group students' needs and objectives in digital portfolios to check them easily whenever needed, which can be a good initiative towards the digitalization of ESP teaching and assessment.

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