Negotiated syllabus for Second Chance Schools: Theoretical considerations and the practicalities of its implementation

Valavani Sofia

Second Chance School of Alexandroupolis

Abstract

Diversity in Second Chance Schools demands a new approach to education and training and the existence of multiple identities, values and cultures within Second Chance Schools (SCSs) challenges both teachers and learners to cultivate mutual understanding and promote democratic standards in class. Due to the lack of a specific syllabus proposal, this study focuses on making an innovative proposal and suggesting a negotiated syllabus for SCSs. Conclusions are drawn with respect to the learner-centred philosophy of SCSs, the field of lifelong learning and theories of adult education, and are also used in the proposal of a negotiated syllabus as the best syllabus for SCSs. By reference to interviews, questionnaires and observation and the data collected, the SCS situation is clarified and the findings are used in stressing the need for implementing a negotiated syllabus in SCSs. A practical framework for the implementation of a negotiated syllabus is also provided.

Keywords: second chance schools, negotiated syllabus, adult education, lifelong learning, democratic standards in education

1. Introduction

In an increasingly expanding Europe, constant demographic, economic, and political changes call for the adoption of new perspectives. These demand a new approach to education and training within a spirit of co-operation and collaboration with other people through a lifelong state of learning.

When the Feira European Council in June 2000 asked the Member States to foster lifelong learning for all, the Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning was issued in November 2000, which highlighted the objectives of learning, including active citizenship, personal fulfillment and social inclusion. The principles underpin lifelong learning and guide its effective implementation. They also emphasise the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities, tackling inequality and social exclusion. Thus, in order to fight social exclusion and school failure, Second Chance Schools (SCSs) were established.

These anti-exclusion programmes cater for those adults who lack basic and social skills and aim at bringing them back into the folds of our society and preventing others go astray. Although its philosophy and principles, based on innovative teaching/learning methods, are clearly stated, there is little provision for an English teacher in terms of the type of syllabus and practical resources to work with (Tsafos & Hondolidou 2003).

The present article discusses theories of adult education and reviews the general characteristics of adult learners with the aim to draw various conclusions important for the selection of the negotiated syllabus as the best syllabus for SCSs.

2. Second Chance Schools

Facilitating the fight against illiteracy of adults, the Adult Education General Secretariat has implements programmes through which adults who have dropped out of schools have the opportunity to improve their academic and professional qualifications, so that they can get more easily integrated in the labour market or have a second chance for the continuation of their studies. This action addresses adults who were not able to complete their initial compulsory education and aims at offering them a second chance for the acquisition of a study certificate of the compulsory education.

Second Chance Schools is, therefore, a flexible and innovative programme, based on learners' needs and interests, which aims at combatting the social exclusion of the individuals who lack the qualifications and skills necessary for them to meet the contemporary needs in social life and labour market.

2.1 Teaching and learning in Second Chance Schools

The need for teaching 'innovation' in the agenda of SCSs programme is naturally very high. As the target group consists mainly – though not exclusively – of school drop-outs, it is important that the second chance be very different from the first one. Adults, according to Vekris and Hondolidou (2003: 19), would not wish to return to a place of failure, nor would they be more likely to succeed, unless the main features of the education on offer differed significantly from those of the regular school system.

The SCS curriculum, as described by Vekris, (2003: 21), aims basically at the following:

1. Development of skills in language, mathematics and communication, with special emphasis on foreign languages and Information and Computing Technologies.

2. Basic training and preparation for professional life in cooperation with the local authorities.

3. Development of skills in the domain of the personal interests of the learners, such as sports, music, theatre, etc.

Besides, as Tsafos and Hondolidou (2003: 41) support, the guiding philosophy of SCSs is action-oriented and mainly focuses on discovery and practical learning by emphasising the learners' role (discovery learning) rather than offering knowledge through teaching a pre-determined list of specified items.

3. Theoretical considerations of the present article

When selecting a syllabus for adult learners in SCSs, different theories and approaches of adult learning namely, Freirean pedagogy, constructivism, progressivism, and experiential learning as well as a critical search among a number of suggested syllabus frameworks found in the relevant literature need to be taken under consideration.

In Freire's view of adult education (Freire 2000: 32), personal freedom and the development of individuals can only occur mutually with others: Every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a 'dialogical encounter' with others. In this process, the old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship is overcome.

In light of the above issues in Freirean pedagogy and his "education for freedom", the present paper will attempt to propose an effective SCS syllabus selection and provide grounding for a learner-centred syllabus, reintroducing the SCS learners as the key participants in the learning process.

The theoretical basis for learner-centred teaching is provided by constructivism, a view of learning that suggests that learners create their own knowledge based on their previous experience and social interactions. This theory can also be found in the work of Piaget, who believes that action and self-directed problem-solving lie at the heart of learning and learner development (Wood 1998: 5).

Nunan (1988: 17) supports that progressivism, as another educational ideology, finds expression in process syllabi, which are less concerned with specifying content or output than with the sorts of learning activities in which learners should engage.

As Brookfield (1983: 16) has commented, writers in the field of experiential learning have tended to use the term in two contrasting senses. On the one hand the term is used to describe the sort of learning undertaken by learners who are given a chance to acquire

and apply knowledge, in an immediate and relevant setting. On the other hand, experiential learning is, significantly appreciated by lifelong learning strategies since it recognises individuals' existing knowledge, skills and experience gained over long periods and in diverse contexts.

3.1 General characteristics of adult learners

Rogers (1996: 60) has selected seven characteristics that seem to be true for the large majority of adult learners, whatever their situation or stage of development:

- They are all adults by definition
- They are engaged in a continuous process of growth
- They all bring a package of experience and values
- They usually come to education with set intentions
- They bring certain expectations about education itself
- They all possess set patterns of learning

We can see, therefore, that we are faced with a difficult task from the start. Our target group consists of a wide variety of people all bringing their own advantages to the learning situation. They also differ on a number of counts - their learning goals and perceptions of the learning process, their subjective learning needs, and their culturally based expectations of the learning process. Learners, therefore, in SCSs, should be the main reference point in decision-making with respect to both content and the method of teaching.

3.2 Can pre-determined syllabi help in SCSs?

Johnson (1989) notes that the one-way flow of information is inherent in a pre-determined syllabus and the lack of interaction and consultation with the learner, which seems to impose an external agenda on SCS learners, fails to mobilise their 'internal' syllabi. This lack of negotiation also seems to regard teachers in SCSs as unproblematic deliverers of the syllabus and not as 'flexible' negotiators, ready to 'change track in a lesson' (Johnson 1989: 13). On the other hand, this is rarely the case in SCS environment and teachers almost always use their expertise to adapt and deliver the syllabus according to local circumstances of SCSs. Why, then, have an imposed syllabus if its aims and objectives are often going to be altered and amended in ways not intended by its writer?

'Specialist' syllabi also seem to regard learners in SCSs as passive acceptors of language whose motivations remain unquestioned. Rogers (1982: 144) calls it "imposition" and through this he concludes that although "a lot of English is taught, not enough is learnt". To build on the ideas of Freire (2000), learners in SCSs, learning with an 'imposed' syllabus, are seen as blank pages, receptacles of knowledge, not as individuals who can help construct the syllabus and the lesson.

Besides, learners in SCSs bring with them to the learning environment a great deal of experience and knowledge, which can enrich the classroom experience and indeed determine the nature of that experience. A good teacher, therefore, should exploit to the fullest extent all knowledge already available in the classroom, as Clark (1991: 19) states, by creatively involving learners in the design of the pedagogical programme. Hence, they should concentrate on the democratization of the classroom, move away from the syllabus-teacher-learner flow of knowledge to learner-centred development and provide an appropriate flexible negotiated syllabus for SCS learners' environment, responding to lifelong-learning and SCS philosophy, distinctiveness of adult education, and learner-centredness.

The idea, therefore, of just one pre-determined syllabus being a panacea for language teaching and learning in SCSs seems extremely improbable.

3.3 The significance of negotiation and the negotiated syllabus

In discussions about the organization of syllabus content, Pienemann (1985) seems to accept that syllabus writers are rather detached from the actual learners in the classroom, at times having to guess what learners can understand. This questions the whole notion that an expert can in fact successfully design syllabi. Moreover, whilst Brumfit (1984: 79) proposes that experts 'fit' the syllabus to learners' needs, we believe that this is a very optimistic view of what a pre-determined syllabus writer can in fact achieve through consideration of factors external to SCS learners.

It seems, therefore, unlikely that expert syllabi can effectively provide SCS learners with ideal conditions for learning, since such syllabi appear to fail to meet their needs in basic and social skills and can not help them to reinsert both socially and professionally, which is the main objective of the SCS programme. Johnson (1989) notes that the one-way flow of information and the lack of interaction and consultation with the learner are both inherent in a pre-determined syllabus.

3.4 Classroom decision–making and negotiation: Conceptualising a negotiated syllabus
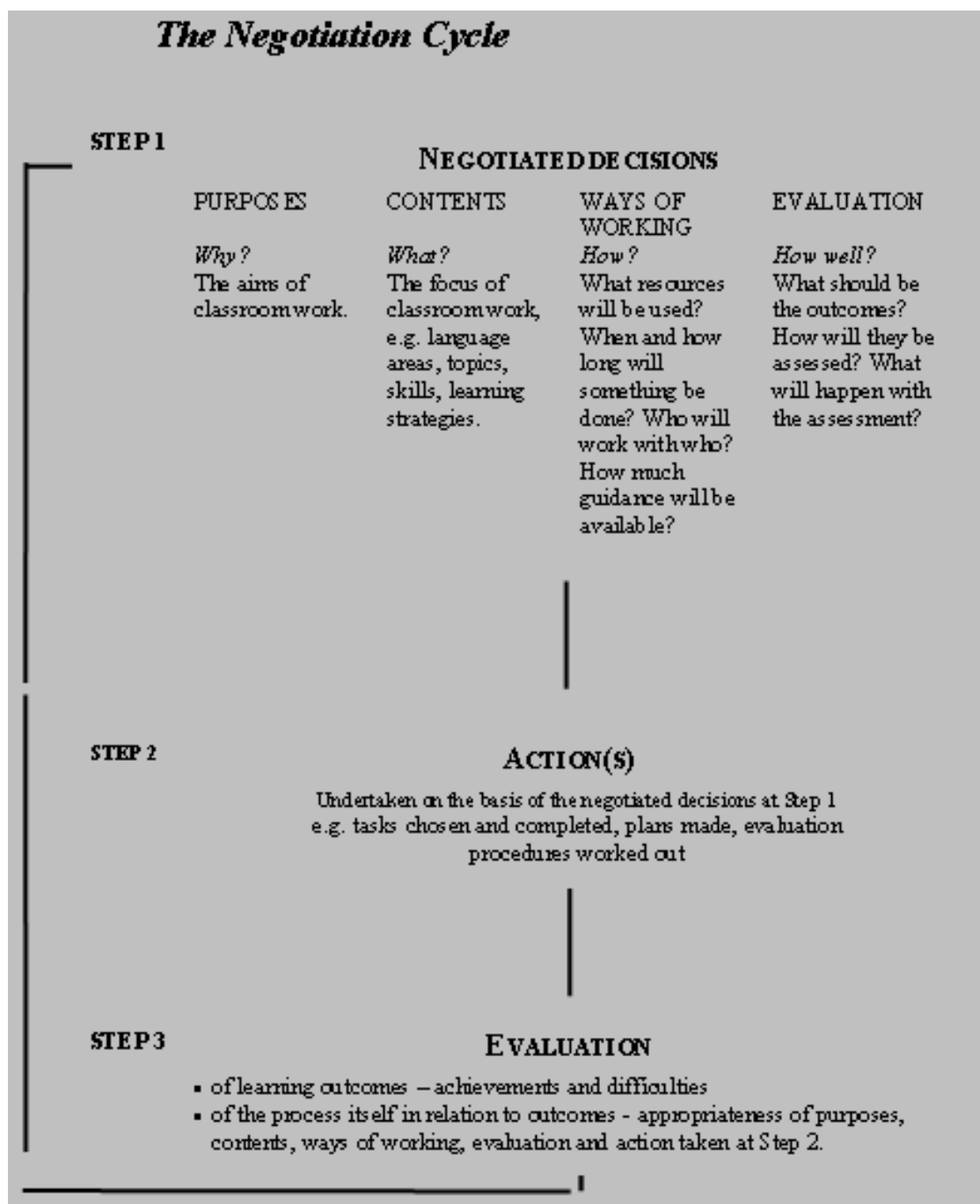
Negotiated syllabus seems to distinguish itself from conventional, content syllabi by identifying classroom decisions as potentials for negotiation. White (1988: 98), points out that such a syllabus enables joint participation by teacher and learner and requires followed methods and objectives to be related with the decision-making. Breen, in Breen and Littlejohn (2000: 29), becomes more specific and stresses that as a framework, a negotiated syllabus identifies "the range of decisions that can be open to negotiation, the steps in a negotiation cycle and the elements or levels in the classroom curriculum to which the negotiation cycle can be applied". For the purpose of this article it is important to explore each of Breen's components of a negotiated syllabus, as well as the concepts of the "negotiation cycle" and the "curriculum pyramid", which, as suggested, can become the basis for the design of a framework for a negotiated syllabus.

As far as "the range of decisions open to negotiation" is concerned, Breen, in Breen and Littlejohn (ibid: 30), suggests that procedural negotiation can be the means for teachers and students to reach agreement in four key decision-making areas that, in turn, can generate a curriculum. Decisions, therefore, in the SCS classroom will be made in relation to: the purposes of language learning (why?), the content or subject matter which learners will work upon (what?), the ways of working in the classroom (how?), learners' preferred means of evaluation of the efficiency and quality of the work and its outcomes (how well?).

These four areas of decision-making are expressed in terms of questions the answers to which are negotiated by the teacher and the learners together. Negotiation, therefore, between the teacher and the learners and between the learners themselves, with the use of different tools, can be devoted to any one of these or similar questions, depending at certain points on the context in which the classroom group works.
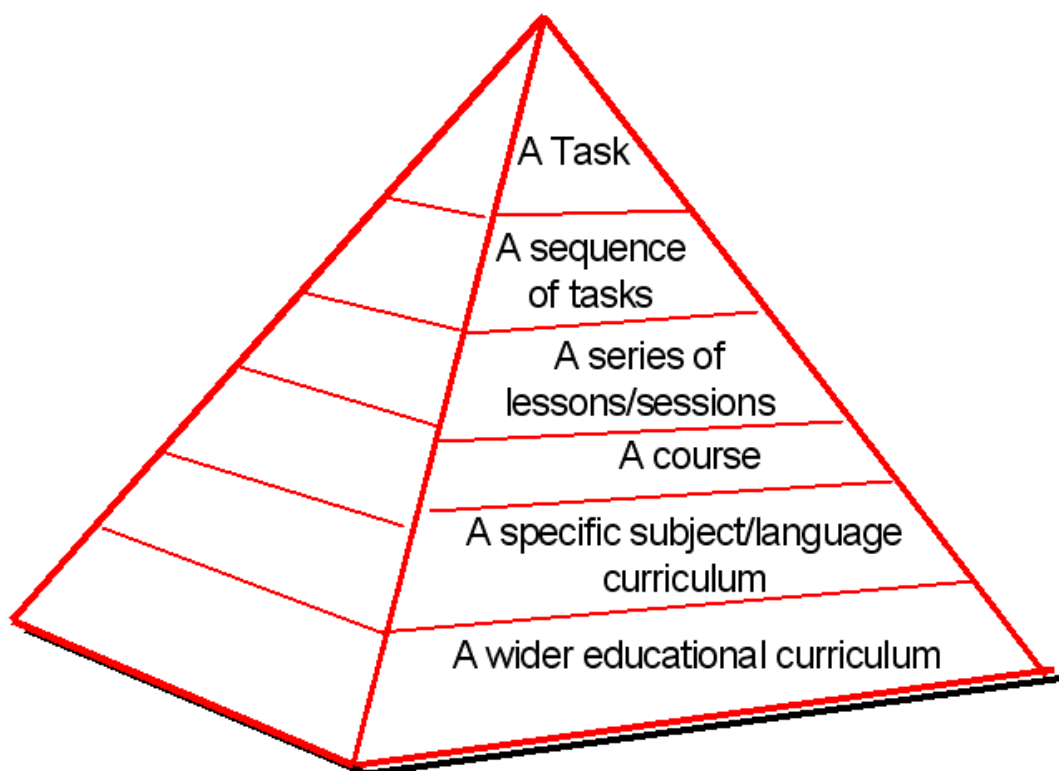
The "negotiation cycle" within a negotiated syllabus, as illustrated by Breen and Littlejohn (ibid: 284) in Figure 1 below, indicates three important steps in the cycle:

Figure 1. The negotiation cycle (Breen and Littlejohn 2000: 32)

The Negotiation Cycle

STEP 1

NEGOTIATED DECISIONS

PURPOSES	CONTENTS	WAYS OF WORKING	EVALUATION
Why? The aims of classroom work.	*What?* The focus of classroom work, e.g. language areas, topics, skills, learning strategies.	*How?* What resources will be used? When and how long will something be done? Who will work with who? How much guidance will be available?	*How well?* What should be the outcomes? How will they be assessed? What will happen with the assessment?

STEP 2

ACTION(S)

Undertaken on the basis of the negotiated decisions at Step 1 e.g. tasks chosen and completed, plans made, evaluation procedures worked out

STEP 3

EVALUATION

- of learning outcomes – achievements and difficulties
- of the process itself in relation to outcomes - appropriateness of purposes, contents, ways of working, evaluation and action taken at Step 2.
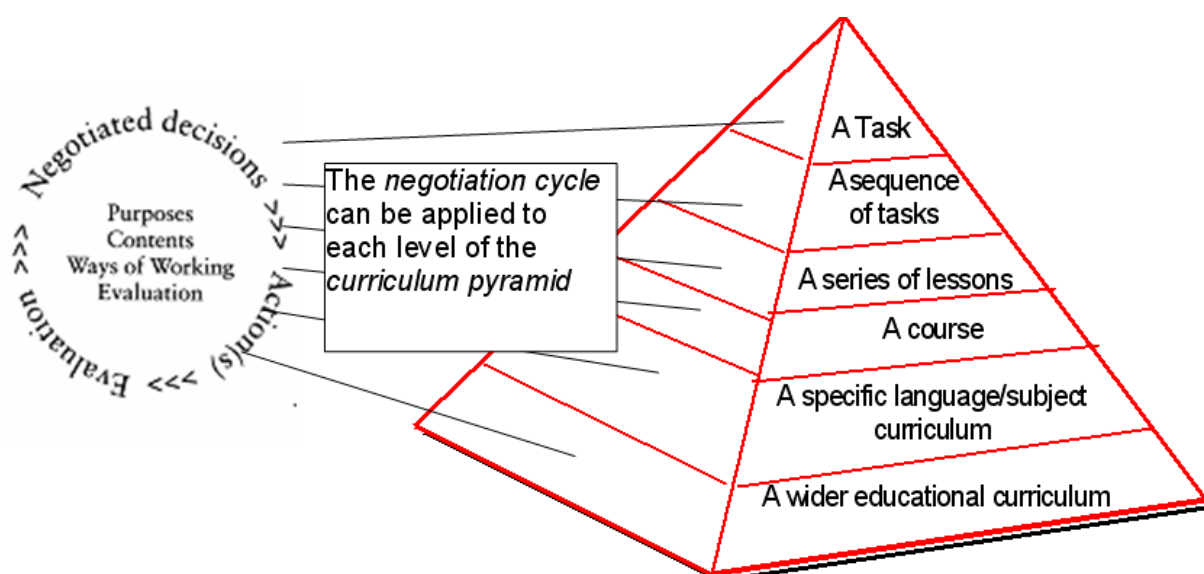
As part of its framework, a negotiated syllabus identifies different reference points for the negotiation cycle in terms of levels in a curriculum pyramid. Figure 2, in Breen and Littlejohn (ibid: 286), illustrates these levels on which the cycle may focus at appropriate times.

Figure 2. The curriculum pyramid: levels of focus for the negotiation cycle (Breen and Littlejohn 2000: 286)

A Task

A sequence of tasks

A series of lessons/sessions

A course

A specific subject/language curriculum

A wider educational curriculum

As we can see in Figure 2, any decisions that are taken manifest themselves in the actions taken in the classroom. These may range from the immediate, moment-by-moment decisions made while learners are engaged in a task (for example, whether they are to work in groups or alone), to the more long-term planning of a language course (for example, what will be the focus of each lesson), and through to the planning of the wider educational curriculum.

Together, therefore, the negotiation cycle (Figure 1) and the curriculum pyramid (Figure 2) allow us to conceptualise a negotiated syllabus as negotiation at specific levels of curriculum planning. Breen's figure (ibid: 287) illustrates this, with the negotiation cycle potentially being applied to a particular decision area (purposes, contents, ways of working or evaluation) at each of the different levels in the pyramid (Figure 3)

Figure 3. A negotiated (process) syllabus (Breen and Littlejohn 2000: 287)

To summarise so far, it has been stated that a negotiated syllabus provides a particular answer to the question: Which classroom decisions are open to negotiation? It additionally offers a framework for decision-making for developing the curriculum of a particular classroom group by proposing the range of decisions open to negotiation, the steps in a negotiation cycle and the levels in a curriculum to which the cycle can be applied. Figure 3 above summarises the framework that has been described.

4. Tools for a negotiated syllabus

The following suggestions are stated, in light of the theories of adult education and lifelong learning namely, Freiran pedagogy (2000) and his "education of freedom", constructivism, progressivism and experiential learning, as the theoretical basis for learner-centred teaching and negotiation syllabus.

The present paper attempts to list and illustrate some suggestions which can be adopted in SCS classrooms, in terms of the above decision areas, in what follows.

a) Establishing purposes: Initial questionnaires to learners, learning contracts, weekly planning of sessions.

b) Decisions concerning contents: A learning plan developed jointly by a teacher and learners, learner-designed activities (Learning vocabulary).

c) Decisions concerning ways of working: Discussion to establish who should do what

d) Evaluation of outcomes: Daily/ Weekly/ Monthly retrospective accounts,

reflection charts, an assessment (can-do) card, work diaries, reflective learning journals, peer interviews, portfolios, one-to one consultations.

4.1 Implications and challenges for future research

The purpose of the above suggestions, which can be tailored to fit different schedules and needs, has not been to argue that classroom decision-making and negotiated syllabus should replace teacher decision-making. Teachers remain at the heart of the process and through their new roles as responders, challengers, knowledgeable participants and negotiators appear to have more real voice in the classroom and they can personally grow as participants in ongoing dialogue.

Nevertheless, Breen, in Breen and Littlejohn (ibid: 102) supports that we have not yet achieved, nor is it feasible to achieve, the same intensity of commitment by all teachers to pupils sharing in determining aspects of the syllabus. Nor have we systematically recorded student reactions to these processes. It is, therefore, difficult to prove that any aspect of language pedagogy in the classroom has a direct effect upon a SCS learner's learning. This is not to ignore the fact that the application of negotiated syllabus seems to be a challenging but sometimes difficult undertaking for teachers and learners.

5. Conclusion

As the target population has some unique as well as shared characteristics, it is thought that such a proposal can offer significant opportunities for developing basic skills and qualifications and trigger processes of self-discovery, shared decision-making and responsibility. It is by no means intended to be prescriptive. How could it be when the learners who are negotiating the syllabus are different, and the regular teachers have developed their thinking from one year to the next? This unpredictability is, in our view, a tribune to the underlying principles of a negotiated syllabus; it is also part of the challenge and excitement of a negotiated syllabus and shared classroom decision-making which seem to represent one of the most significant practical and theoretical developments in language teaching in recent years. However, it remains the case that there are only a few published accounts or evaluations of the negotiated syllabus in action and therefore it remains to be seen after a trial period of a negotiated syllabus in SCSs, what teachers' and learners' comments and suggestions are, as theory can sometimes be very remote from practice.

Refernces

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