

Negotiated Syllabus and Undergraduate Students Reading Comprehension and Oral Production Ability: Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

The negotiated syllabus, also known as a learner-centered and process-oriented syllabus, was introduced as an alternative to a pre-determined syllabus a couple of decades ago. The review of the related studies shows the number of studies in the use of negotiated syllabus in English language teaching is scanty. This study aimed at delving into the impacts of the negotiated syllabus on undergraduate students' reading comprehension, oral production, and the participants' perspectives about the syllabus. A mixed-methods research design was employed. Data were collected through researcher-developed tests and an interview checklist. The quantitative section analyzed through independent samples-tests ($p=0.05$) verified that the negotiated syllabus had a significant effect on the experimental mean scores regarding reading comprehension and oral ability production. In addition, results of the qualitative phase indicated that the use of negotiated syllabus, despite some learner, teacher, and institute-related constraints, has some pedagogical advantages. In light of the results, teachers are recommended to minimize the limitations and implement the negotiated syllabus in teaching English programs to optimize the language learners' motivation and language achievement.

Keywords: negotiated syllabus, reading comprehension, oral production, learners' perspectives

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1. Introduction

Scholars in educational curriculum and applied linguists have distinguished between syllabus and curriculum. Although the two concepts are sometimes used synonymously, there are conceptual differences between them. The curriculum, as defined by Johnson (1989), includes “all the relevant decision-making processes of all the participants” while the syllabus is its result (p. 33). However, Brown (1995, p. 7) stated that “a syllabus provides a focus for what should be studied, along with a rationale for how that content should be selected and ordered.” In the same vein, Richards (2001) defined a syllabus as “A specification of the content of a course of instruction [which] lists what will be taught and tested” (p. 2). By the same token, Nunan (1999, p. 73) maintained that “a syllabus consists of a list of content to be taught through a course of study.”

The review of the related literature on syllabus design regarding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) shows that language syllabi can be divided into two types: product-oriented and process-oriented (Long & Robinson, 1998). While the main focus of the product syllabus is on what language learners learn as a result of teaching (Nunan, 2005), the direction of the process syllabus is on the teaching processes of how the ultimate outcomes of learning and teaching can be achieved (Nunan, 2001; Shabbah, 2018). One type of process-oriented language syllabi is negotiated syllabus.

It has also been claimed that as in teacher-centered approaches to teaching, teachers do most of the work, and the students are not always constructors of knowledge but only passive recipients of knowledge. It causes poor language performance and prevents students’ educational growth (Duckworth, 2009). This approach was also reported to have poor effects on the students’ achievement (e.g., Alrabai, 2014a; Alrabai, 2014b; Alrabai & Moskovsky, 2016).

As a response to the researchers’ call to apply learner-centered approaches, there has been a plethora of research on appropriate syllabi construction (Altman & Cashin, 1992; Cullen & Harris, 2009; Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Richmond et al., 2014, 2016a, 2016b). However, more importantly, the findings of the majority of the related studies suggest that learner-centered syllabi have more positive impacts on students’ achievement (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Richmond et al., 2014; Richmond et al., 2016b; Saville et al., 2010).

It can also be seen that some researchers have recently recommended a gradual shift to student-centered classrooms in EFL settings to promote learner autonomy (Alibakhshi, 2015; Sarani et al., 2014) and to avoid teacher and student conflicts and resistance (Lynch, 2010; Peyton et al., 2010). Negotiated syllabus as an alternative to traditional teacher syllabus has attracted the attention of researchers from various fields, most notably education and applied linguistics.

Moreover, in the negotiated syllabus, there is a shared decision indicating that there is a mutual agreement between teachers and learners on how to select the materials based on the language learners’ needs and preferences and how to manage the class and evaluate the learners’ achievement (Azarnoosh & Kargozari, 2018; Malmir & Bagheri, 2019; Peyvandi et al., 2019). As Boomer et al. (1992) believe, this

syllabus uncovers “a shared detailed understanding between teacher and students of what is going on, what needs to be done, and how it will be done” (p. 287). First, it was claimed that students could have a better performance when teachers develop a student-centered syllabus (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). The students perceive the teachers as having teaching characteristics such as flexibility and approachability (Richmond et al., 2014). Negotiated syllabus as a part of a learner-centered approach puts language learners in the center and emphasizes shared decision-making (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b). The significant effect of the negotiated syllabus on learners’ motivation (Rahmanpanah & Tajeddin, 2015), self-awareness (Nunan, 1989), writing and speaking (e.g., Abbasian & Seyed-Hendi, 2011; Abbasian & Malardi, 2013; Nguyen, 2017; Salehizadeh et al., 2020) reading comprehension of ESP students (Peyvandi, Azarnoosh, & Siyyari, 2019) is well established. Nonetheless, to the best knowledge of the researcher(s), no mixed methods study has been reported on the impact of the negotiated syllabus on undergraduate students’ reading comprehension and improving their oral production ability.

1.1. Research Objectives

This mixed-methods study aimed at investigating the impact of the negotiated syllabus on undergraduate students’ reading comprehension and oral production ability. It is also attired to deeply delve into the participants’ perceptions about the advantages and constraints of using negotiated syllabus in undergraduate students’ course of English as a foreign language. More specifically, the following research questions were raised:

1. Does a procedural negotiated syllabus have statistically significant impacts on improving EFL learners’ reading comprehension?
2. Does a procedural negotiated syllabus have statistically significant impacts on reducing EFL learners’ oral production ability?
3. What are the undergraduate students’ perceptions about using procedural negotiated syllabus in general English courses?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Background of the Study

Learner-centeredness of negotiated syllabus and its focus on learners as active creators of classroom processes by problem-solving and individual-specific activities prove that this central design has traces of progressivism (Clark, 1987). As a primary point of the negotiated syllabus, negotiation has three assortments with a likelihood of co-occurrence: personal, interactive, and procedural. Personal negotiation deals with individuals’ mental processing of input; interactive negotiation has to do with mutual interactions between a speaker and listener to make sure of their mutual understanding; and procedural negotiation, which has a

wider scale compared to interactive one, involves all members, i.e., teacher and learners, to decide on the organization of the classroom procedure (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b).

Despite the intertwinement of all three kinds, the negotiated syllabus is more of the third one named procedural negotiation. Circling unanimous agreement among all attendees with personal and interactive mechanisms, this syllabus has mainly to do with sharing and uncovering intended meaning. Therefore, exploiting shared understanding, clarification of assumptions, and adopting the most appropriate alternative to have an efficient teaching and learning agenda is the case within procedural negotiation (Azarnoosh & Kargozari, 2018). The negotiated syllabus is generally of two types as follows (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b):

As opposed to explicit negotiation, this type pivots around indirect negotiation of contents, procedure and evaluation posed by Breen and Little John (as cited in Gourlay, 2005); “teacher’s interpretation of a syllabus and reasons for classroom decisions are usually covert, and learners’ interpretations of what is done and how it relates to their learning are the focus of overt consideration” (p.211). This negotiation makes it more beneficial to realize learners’ adjustment to class activities even if there seems to be a discrepancy between teachers’ and learners’ agendas through which the learning process is negatively affected. Accordingly, taking advantage of explicit and implicit kinds of procedural negotiation would be used at the right time in the right place (Gourlay, 2005).

There are other factors appointing the extent to which teachers and learners have the authority to negotiate syllabus design as Nation and Macalister (2010) maintained the significant role of specificity in the lesson, decision-making realms, language skills, and curriculum design, in appointing the extent and degree to which a syllabus can be negotiated or unanimously decided on. Furthermore, according to Mollaei (2013), some or all parts of content, teaching methodology, control and monitoring, assessment, and evaluation could be subjected to negotiation and shared decision-making.

Abdelmalak (2015) has argued that negotiated syllabus has several advantages. However, having all involved in class decisions means no overthrow is intended on the teacher’s side. Still, the teacher is at the heart of initiating and leading negotiations to achieve the best results. Therefore, teachers’ intention to have such a syllabus is prioritized over other facets (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000a). Nation and Macalister (2010) also stated that negotiated syllabus “involves the teacher and the learners working together to make decisions at many of the parts of the curriculum design process” (p.19).

Öztürk (2013) believes that negotiated syllabus can provide learners’ active involvement in the shared decisions about developing a syllabus through dealing with the teachers. Breen and Littlejohn (2000a, p. 1) described this syllabus as “the discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organized.” This syllabus gained popularity in education in general and teaching EFL in particular since a couple of decades ago because of the great attention paid to learner-centered approaches to language pedagogy on the one hand and post-method principles of language pedagogy on the other hand (Alibakhshi & Rezaei, 2014).

Richards and Schmidt (2010) stated that the student-centered approach to teaching is deeply rooted in a “belief that attention to the nature of learners should be central to all aspects of language teaching, including planning teaching, and evaluation” (p.3). Student-centered instruction is deeply rooted in the assumptions of the constructivist view that emphasizes the knowledge construction on the part of learners. In this view, students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active learners who construct knowledge through synthesizing information and integrating this information with skills like communication, inquiry, and critical thinking (Baldauf & Moni, 2006; Brown, 2008).

2.2. Factors Influencing Negotiated Syllabus

A couple of factors take place indispensably throughout a classroom context by which the degree and depth of negotiation between teacher and learners would be appointed. The first factor is a pre-determined curriculum. Even though a pre-determined curriculum has got its own advantages in specifying the aims and borders of a course, a procrastinated ongoing negotiation can tackle any probable discrepancy between learners' real needs and the designed system (Nunan, 1989) even if the government officially appoints the course policies and structures on a top-down hierarchy (Little, 1995). Further, on the theme of a pre-determined curriculum, learners and teachers can make the most of it as guidance or map to the soundness of both procedure and evaluation criteria so as not to become stuck in the conflict of learners' needs and course's expectations (Serrano-Sampedro, 2000).

The second factor has been reported to be cultural issues. Aside from the type of culture, cultural discrepancies among learners or between teacher and learners could cause obstructions on the way of negotiation (Azarnoosh & Kargozari, 2018). However, in some cases, there are thoughts to be pointed to having a learner-centered approach more effective in cultures where the stress is more on autonomy and self-direction of learners and less on the centeredness of the teacher. On the other hand, according to Littlejohn (1983), negotiation is based on a learner-centered schedule where passive and teacher-dependent learners could be of use if it takes steps over time with enough care and attention. Regarding difficulties, teachers' bad experiences or wrong approach, e.g., in knowing where to intervene, to negotiation could lead to a breakdown (Serrano-Sampedro, 2000).

The third factor was labeled Class Size and Students' Abilities. Individual-focused plans are an indispensable particle of a class negotiation as learners' limitations, socio-emotional issues, self-esteem, and self-efficacies are different. However, teachers might find it more challenging to pay enough attention to individuals in a large classroom. Technically speaking, when it comes to active self-initiated learners, they even go from strength to strength in terms of intrinsic autonomy and motivation (Ushioda, 2003). With this in mind, by negotiation, learners become more accountable for their cognitive processes as they reflect continually on their learning process and consequently are responsible for their self-regulation and awareness (Smith, 2000).

The fourth factor which might influence the use of negotiated syllabus is learners' voice. Further, on the theme of the learners' voice, vanLier (2007) makes out that learners are considered agents. i.e., they are in charge of their language learning and mounting their social interaction, collaboration, and say despite inevitable inequality of power in class (Sinclair, 2008). By interaction, learners come to the point that they can make progress in creating democratic and authentic decisions, but they also find it their say to come up with their opinions if it demands them (Boon, 2011). The relationship between teacher and learners is another point that is mutually subjected to improvement. The whole procedure leads to a look-up by which all specific achieved outcomes are valued by both sides (MacKay et al., 2000).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method

The researchers employed a mixed-methods research design to explore the research questions. For the quantitative research questions, we used a quasi-experimental research design. As we could not select the study participants through random sampling, we used two intact classes and exposed each to either control or experimental conditions. The control group received a pre-determined teacher syllabus, while the experimental group was instructed through a negotiated syllabus. The two intact groups received pretests on oral production and reading comprehension at the onset of the study. At the end of the semester, the two intact groups received the posttests on oral production and reading comprehension. However, a qualitative case study was employed in the second phase of the study. Wiersma (1995, p. 213) believes "qualitative case study focus to research on a few cases or few research settings (informants) and many variables".

3.2. Participants

The first group of participants was selected for the treatment phase of the study. The students taking a general English course at the faculty of communication sciences (two intact classes) were recruited as the participants of the treatment phase. The sample size for the treatment phase was 72 (36 in the experimental group 36 in the control group). The participants were undergraduate students at the university mentioned above. They were both male and female students ranging from 19 to 27 years old. To check the initial homogeneity of the intact classes, the researcher administered the pretests. Results showed no initial differences between the groups at the onset of the study. It should be noted that 18 participants were interviewed for the qualitative phase of the study: 10 students exposed to the procedural negotiated syllabus, 5 EFL teachers, and three experts in material development were selected. The criterion for the number of participants from each group was data saturation when no further theme emerged.

3.3. Instruments

The researchers used different instruments to collect the data. Each instrument is described in detail as follows.

3.3. Reading Tests 1 and 2

The researchers developed two reading tests: One was administered at the onset of the treatment and another after the treatment sessions. Each test consisted of 30 multiple choice and ten cloze-passage items. The tests were administered to both groups. Three applied linguists whose field of interest was language assessment verified the content validity of the tests. The reliability of the tests was assessed through Kurder-Richardson 21 (KR-21) approach. The reliability indices were reported to be 0.82 and 0.86, which seemed acceptable.

3.4. Oral Production Tests 1 and 2

The researchers developed two oral production tests. Each consisted of different essay tasks such as summarizing, paraphrasing, description, and explanation. The participants' oral productions were recorded. Two raters assess the participants' oral production in terms of fluency and accuracy through a numerical scale ranging from 5 to 30. The inter-rater reliability approach was used to investigate the reliability of the tests, and the results showed that the inter-rater reliability coefficients for pretest and posttest were 0.92 and 0.91, which seemed to be acceptable. Three applied linguists verified that the test tasks elicit the language learners' production ability. They all agreed that the assigned task is suitable for measuring the language learners' oral production.

3.5. Interview Checklist

In qualitative case studies, interviewing is a main needed source of data for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. As Cohen et al. (2011) believe, structured and open-ended questions can enable interviewees to address issues in their own words. Wilkinson and Bhandarkar (1999) also added that semi-structured interviewing is necessary to get deep meanings and values since it "allows the interviews to be flexible and somewhat conversational" (Whitley & Kite, 1996, p. 424). That is why, in this study, semi-structured interviews are used as the main data gathering strategy. It will be conducted with language learners and EFL teachers. The interview questions were asked to elicit the participants' perspectives and beliefs about the factors associated with negotiated syllabus and how they might affect the students' language achievement.

3.6. Procedure

The quantitative phase of the study was undertaken in different steps. In the first step, the two intact classes were assigned to two treatment conditions: teacher syllabus group and procedural negotiated syllabus. The two intact groups received the pretests. After 13 sessions, the two intact groups received the oral production and reading comprehension tests. The first researcher used teacher syllabus for the control

group, whereas he used negotiated syllabus in the experimental group. He negotiated with the students and made decisions about the topics used in the classroom, teaching activities, teachers' and the students' roles, student-student interactions, teacher-student interactions, and the evaluation and assessment method. The topics with the highest rate of agreement among the students and teachers were prepared collaboratively. When the negotiated syllabus was selected, the teacher administered reading and oral production tests, which were developed based on the content of the negotiated syllabus. In the last session, equivalent forms of reading pretest and oral production test were administered to the experimental groups. The groups' scores on pretests and posttests were compared.

3.7. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed in different ways. First, for research questions 1 and 2, the researchers used an independent sample t-test to compare the control and experimental groups' scores on the reading and oral production tests. However, a qualitative data analysis technique was used for research question three. Gall et al. (1996) suggested three different approaches to analyze case study data: structural analysis, interpretational analysis, and reflective analysis. The second and third approaches were mostly used in this study. Categorization and interpretation of data were made in terms of common themes and the synthesis of data into an overall portrait of the cases. They were used for describing and explaining the phenomena under investigation.

For the present study, the interview data were transcribed verbatim, coded, and divided into categories in an attempt to discover common themes. Through repeated readings of the transcript, we found themes and patterns. Concerning Bogdan and Biklen (1992), analysis involves working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, and searching for patterns or themes to discover what is important to tell others. Accordingly, the data were analyzed in terms of the following major themes: the factors associated with negotiated syllabus, feasibility and desirability of using this syllabus, and the constraints.

4. Results

This study made an attempt to explore three questions. In the following sections, the results of each research question are presented.

4.1. Research Question 1

The first research question aimed at investigating the impact of negotiated syllabus on improving undergraduate Iranian students' oral production. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
T-test for Comparing the Groups' Means on the Pretest

Groups	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics		
	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Control	13.5	1.5	0.29	70	0.77
Experimental	13.1	1.6			

As it can be seen in Table, the mean scores of the control and experimental groups on the reading pretest were 13.5 (SD=1.5) and 13.1 (SD=1.6), respectively. Results also show a statistically significant difference between the groups' mean scores ($t=0.29$, $df=70$, $p=0.77>0.05$), suggesting that the two groups were homogenous at the onset of the study. In the following Table, the groups' means of reading posttest are compared.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and T-Test for Comparing the Groups' Means on Reading Test

Groups	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics		
	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Control	19.8	1.9	10.3	70	0.001
Experimental	23.8	1.3			

As it can be seen in Table 2, the mean scores of the control and experimental groups on the reading posttest are 19.8(SD=1.9) and 3.8(SD=1.3), respectively. Inferential statistics show that the difference between the two groups' means is statistically significant ($t=10.3$, $df=70$, $p=0.001<0.05$), favoring the experimental group. Therefore, it can be argued that negotiated syllabus has positively contributed to the undergraduate students' reading comprehension.

4.2. Research Question 2

The second research question addressed the impact of the negotiated syllabus on undergraduate students' oral performance. The two groups' mean scores on oral performance pretest and posttest are presented in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and T-Test for Comparing the Groups' Scores on Oral Production Pretest

Groups	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics		
	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Control	10.5	1.2	0.32	70	0.65
Experimental	10.32	1.1			

As it can be seen in Table 3, the two groups' means on oral performance pretest were 10.5(SD=1.2) and 10.32 (SD=1.2), respectively. Results also show that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups' mean scores ($t=0.32$, $df=70$, $p=0.65>0.05$), suggesting an initial difference between

the oral performance of the two groups. In table 4, the groups’ means on oral performance posttest are compared.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics and T-Test for Comparing the Groups’ Scores on Oral Production Posttest

Groups	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics		
	Mean	SD	t	df	P
Control	17.5	1.6	9.21	70	0.001
Experimental	20.1	1.9			

As it can be seen in Table 4, the two groups’ means on oral performance pretest were 17.5(SD=1.6) and 20.1 (SD=1.9), respectively. Results also show that there statistically significant difference between the groups’ means scores ($t=9.21$, $df=70$, $p=0.001>0.05$), favoring the experimental group. Therefore, it can be argued that negotiated syllabus has positively contributed to the undergraduate students’ oral production.

4.3. Research Question 3

The third research question aimed at exploring the participants’ perceptions about the use of negotiated syllabus. Interviews with the participants were analyzed thematically in terms of advantages and constraints. The themes reported by at least 60% of the participants are reported and exemplified as follows:

A. Advantages of the negotiated syllabus

The interviews were analyzed, and the main advantages of the negotiated syllabus were classified into six categories.

a. Reducing learners’ anxiety and stress

The study participants argued that compared to the other courses they have ever taken at the university, they found it more relaxing and less stressful. As an example, student 12 stated:

As I was involved in selecting the topics and materials for the course, I felt no stress and anxiety because I suggested the kind of topics.in the other courses, the teachers recommend the materials, and we have to choose.

b. Increasing the learners’ motivation

Participants of the study argued that involving students in decisions about the content of the course leads to a reduction of risks associated with exclusively teacher-directed classes and contributes to the development of classroom atmospheres conducive to deeper higher motivation and positive attitudes toward studying in general and learning English as a foreign language in particular. Student 3 exemplifies the theme:

Before taking an English course, I was not motivated to learn English. Still, because the teacher asked me to decide on the topics and evaluation type and content at college, I felt inspired and motivated to learn English.

Teacher 2 also stated that when students' voices about the coursebook and teaching activities in and out of the classroom are heard, they will be motivated. "I had used negotiated syllabus in free discussion courses, and it worked."

c. Equal roles of teachers and students in decision making

Another advantage of the use of negotiated syllabus, as stated by the majority of the participants, was the equal roles of teachers and students in decision making. Teachers and students contribute equally to the decision-making process using the negotiated syllabus. To simply put, the students' voices are heard, and they play important roles in selecting the syllabus. Student 12 stated:

This was the first time my classmates and I were invited to collaborate with the teacher and make a decision about the content of the course

d. Promoting the students' autonomy

The next advantage of the negotiated syllabus was thematically coded as the promotion of the students' autonomy. When the students collaborate with the teachers and make decisions about the content of the course, they feel autonomous. With the help of the negotiation process, teachers will be informed about the topics, issues, and subjects that attract their students' attention so that they can prepare more fruitful lessons. Such kind of consciously preparation for an academic year will also contribute to the self-development of the teachers and language learners. Student 9, for example, stated that:

Teachers' encouragement and the attention he paid to us during the semester made me autonomous and independent; now, I know how to pursue my studies.

e. Changing the students' attitudes toward studying

Both teachers and language learners strongly argued that negotiated syllabus changes the language learners' attitudes toward the English language, teachers, and universities. As reported by teachers 3 and 4 and students 5 and 7, the students exposed to negotiated syllabus felt more enthusiastic and eager to attend the classes and do their assignments on time. The following quotations exemplify the theme:

I didn't particularly appreciate attending an English classroom in high school, but now I don't have the same feeling because I am involved in selecting the topic. (Student 5)

This was when I noticed all students were always present in the classroom. They were rarely late, and they did all the assignments. But in the other classes in which the language learners have to study the predetermined textbook, the students always complain about the irrelevance of the textbook. (Teacher 4)

f. Increasing teachers' flexibility and tolerance

Negotiated syllabus as reported by both students and teachers makes teachers flexible and tolerant of students' resistance to the students' different preferences. As teacher 1 argued, "teachers adjust teaching activities according to the students' needs, suggestions, and preferences."

B. Constraints of using the negotiated syllabus

The main constraints of using negotiated syllabus were coded into three main categories: learner-related, teacher-related, and school/institute-related.

I. Learner related constraints

Results of the qualitative study showed that some of the constraints of the negotiated syllabus are specifically related to learners, which are explained as follows.

a. *Learners' limited awareness of appropriate instructional activities*

The first learner-related constraint was thematically coded as the learners' limited awareness of appropriate instructional activities. The majority of the participants believed that undergraduate students were not well aware of appropriate instructional activities. They need to know the importance of learning English in their academic achievement.

b. *The learners need training in negotiation.*

The second constraint was thematically coded as learners' need for training in negotiation. Participants stated that language learners need to be trained and learn negotiation skills before being exposed to the negotiated syllabus. Teacher 5 said it takes time to train the language learners how to negotiate and decide about the course and teaching activities.

c. *With no coursebooks, learners do not feel a sense of progress*

Participants stated that teachers do not feel they are making progress and learning English when no specific textbook is used. They also stated that if the materials decided by teachers are compiled into a pamphlet, they feel satisfied.

d. *Learners' lack of experience in negotiation*

The learner's lack of experience in negotiation is another constraint related to the learners. Participants believed that learners are experienced enough to negotiate and suggest the topics which suit their needs, lacks, and wants. Teachers also stated that using negotiated syllabus required teachers and learners to be skillful and experienced in negotiation.

e. Diverse needs of the students

Participants stated that language learners have different needs. Teacher 3 stated that in general English classes, students are not homogenous. Some are very proficient, and some are pre-intermediate or beginners. Therefore, it is difficult to have consensus among the students with various language backgrounds.

f. The students' reluctance to negotiate with the teachers

The analysis of the interviews with the participants revealed that some of the students are reluctant to participate in negotiations about the coursebook's content. Teacher 1 stated that it was not easy for him to persuade language learners to negotiate and make decisions about the content of the course.

g. The students' lack of confidence in negotiating with the teacher

The last extracted constraint of the negotiated syllabus was coded as the students' low confidence. Teachers 2 and 4 stated that in the earlier sessions, the students were not confident enough and believed that they could not decide about the content of the course.

II. Institute-related constraints

The second type of constraint is related to the institutes. The teachers and experts in the material development all agreed that the number of the students in each class, the institute's policies for course evaluation, and the institute's policies for classroom time and size are the constraints that make the use of the negotiated syllabus somehow tricky. Teachers believed that a large number of the students in each class, the universities' pre-determined course books, and evaluation policies for summative assessment do not let the teachers hear the learners' voices and teach in line with the predetermined policies. The following extracts from the interviews exemplify the theme:

There are about 40 students in each class, which makes involving the students in making decisions about the course syllabus and meeting each student's desires a bit problematic. Sometimes I have to ignore some of the students' suggestions. (Teacher 5).

At university, teachers are not free to set a time for the final examination because of the schedule pre subscribed by the education department. Therefore, it is not feasible to negotiate the examination time with the students, but it is viable and possible to ask their opinions about the test items and types. (Teacher 7)

III. Teacher-related issues

Almost all the interviewed teachers argued that negotiation with the students is time-consuming and takes valuable class time. They also argued that it is hard for them to cope with the suggestions which are not preferred by the majority of the students. Teachers also stated that they need to teach differently to the students in different classes at the same universities because each course might have its preferences. Teachers also argued that they could not resist the institutes' policies for syllabus and evaluation.

For instance, teacher 2 stated, “I have no autonomy to make changes in the class time and the number of the students in each class, as the institute manger makes decisions about the number of the students in each class and class time”. Teacher 3 also stated “teachers are forced to evaluate the students through a summative test and the time as well as the place of the test are determined by the education department of the institute”.

5. Discussion

In this mixed-methods research design, we investigated the impact of the negotiated syllabus on improving EFL learners’ reading comprehension and the participants’ perceptions about the negotiated syllabus. For this purpose, 72 undergraduate students in two intact general English courses were selected. The students in the experimental group negotiated preferences for the content of the syllabus while designing a negotiated syllabus through collaboration with their teacher and classmates. However, the students in the control group were exposed to a pre-designed syllabus. The two groups’ mean scores on the reading and oral production post-tests were compared. Analysis of the data verified a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group. Therefore, it can be argued that negotiated syllabus has a substantial impact on undergraduate oral production and reading comprehension. The finding of this study are consistent with the findings of some of the previous studies (e.g., Abbasian & Seyed-Hendi, 2011; Abbasian & Malardi, 2013; Baghbaderani & Afghari, 2015; Malmir & Bagheri, 2019; Peyvandi et al., 2019; Uztosun, 2013) which have found that negotiated syllabus has a significant positive effect on speaking and writing ability of university students.

With regard to the qualitative findings, we found that negotiated syllabus has some advantages. The findings lend support to the findings of some of the related studies (e.g., Azarnoosh & Kargozari, 2018; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Boomer et al., 1992; Huang, 2006; Nguyen, 2010; Ozturk, 2013; Peyvandi et al., 2019). To simply put, it can be postulated that negotiation between the teachers and the students in the classroom makes the course in general and teaching activities in particular more appropriate for learners’ needs, encourages students and increases their self-confidence, motivation, and attitudes, develops learner-centeredness and fosters autonomy.

We also found that despite the advantages mentioned by the majority of the participants, there are some constraints caused by the learners, teachers, and the institutes. The findings echo the words of a few researchers (Littlejohn, 1998; Nation & Macalister, 2010), suggesting that to engage students in the decision-making process appropriately, teachers should practice tolerance, risk-taking, flexibility in learners’ capability. Similarly, all language learners are not skillful in negotiation skills, and they may not have enough experience to participate in syllabus decision-making completely. Martyn (200, p. 161) argues that “major constraints seem to be ultimately based on perceptions of none quality of teachers and students, and a restricted view of the process of syllabus negotiation”.

6. Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, it can be strongly argued that negotiated syllabus, despite its challenges, can positively contribute to the student's academic achievement, motivation for learning, and attitudes to learning the English language. By involving the students in making decisions about the syllabus, the teachers can help the language learners overcome the negative affective factors such as foreign language anxiety and stress. Therefore, cooperation between teachers and educational managers of the institutes and universities can increase the teachers' autonomy to involve the students in making decisions about the content of the syllabus, time of classes, and evaluation rubrics and facets. Teachers and educational administrators can also do their best to minimize the constraints and optimize the learners' achievement through practicing negotiated syllabus.

As some variables such as the teachers' experience and significance and the student's personality types and language proficiency, and the context of the study might moderate the impact of the negotiated syllabus on the language learners' language achievement, further large-scale studies are needed.

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