Let's Negotiate: Learner Autonomy in Action in a University ESAP Course

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is often many different things to many people but Holec's early definition that it is "the ability to take charge of one's learning… to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (1981, p. 3) is still extremely influential today. "All aspects" include decisions about the objectives of a course, defining the course contents, and even evaluating what has been acquired. In the context of teaching English at Italian universities, however, this vision can be challenging or even impossible to implement, given the vast number of limitations imposed upon undergraduate programmes from all the different stakeholders involved. This chapter will present an action research project whose aim has been to actively include students in the decision-making processes of an advanced English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) syllabus for economics students at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Parts of the ESAP syllabus, including assessment means, are negotiated with the students in order to allow them to contribute directly to the course contents. In this way, not only does this approach promote learner autonomy as envisaged by Holec, but it also attempts to address the language needs of each individual learner, as each member of the class has the right and opportunity to contribute. The chapter will present the approach to the negotiated syllabus, problems encountered during the study and some of the results of the syllabus implemented, including evaluation from the students themselves.

1. Context and Background to Research

The context in which this action research study took place is the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano in Italy where English, German, and Italian are the languages of instruction in the majority of undergraduate programmes. Specifically, this study focused on students following undergraduate programmes at the Faculty of Economics and Management where this trilingual model is used, so students typically have to study economics in English, legal subjects in Italian, and business administration in German, for example. Generally speaking, the three languages are distributed evenly across the subjects studied on the undergraduate programmes at the Faculty. This study model makes the University one of the very few universities in Europe that require undergraduate students to follow programmes using three languages of instruction.[1]

As the University has three official teaching languages, all students have to be classified as having one of the three as their first language (L1) even if their actual L1 does not match one of the three. In such a case, their official L1 for the purposes of the University will normally be the language in which they have achieved the highest proficiency. This categorisation is done to help regulate language choices that students have to make, including choosing which second and third language courses they have to attend. The students at the Faculty of Economics predominantly have Italian or German as their official L1, and current data show that 57.8% have German as their L1 and 40.5% have Italian. Only 1.5% have English as their L1.[2]

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1   According to the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano's website, the trilingual model of the university is "unique in Europe". (see https://www.unibz.it/en/services/language-centre/study-in-three-languages/)

2   These figures were provided by the Student Secretariat at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano on 1 August 2018.

1.1 The ESAP Course

As well as having to follow the subjects that make up their degree in German, Italian and English, students also have to follow two compulsory English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) courses in their second and third languages, and these courses, and their exams provide credit points like all the other subjects in their degree. Currently all undergraduate economics students that have German and Italian as their L1 have to attend two ESAP courses, one in the first year of their studies, which is pitched at the B2/B2+ level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and a 30-hour advanced (equivalent to the CEFR C1 level) ESAP course in the second year, which I teach and which is the focus of this study.

Before the study commenced, the ESAP course had been designed to provide students with an advanced language course that would provide them with some of the specific academic language and skills that could assist them when studying the subjects that use English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at the Faculty. However, because no recent needs analysis had been undertaken, it was unclear as to whether the skills and language in the course were still relevant for the students. Further, although the students were attending the same undergraduate programme, their overall English-language proficiency tended to be relatively heterogeneous due to their different learning and cultural backgrounds and the fact there were no real language prerequisites to attend the course. Therefore, an assessment of the students' language needs and an examination of the course contents were needed to establish whether the course was effectively addressing students' needs and, if it transpired that the course was not as relevant as it could be, the syllabus could then be modified accordingly.

The existing syllabus had a skills-based approach, due to the fact that the Faculty's specific language model requires students to use English regularly because of the number of subjects where English is the language of instruction. A skills-based approach to language learning "is organized around the different underlying abilities that are involved in using a language for purposes such as reading, writing, listening, or speaking" (Richards, 2001, p. 159) and

aims to improve language proficiency and fluency through a focus on improving some or all of the four skills and their subskills. This approach to syllabus design had therefore been chosen for this particular course due to students' concurrent use of these skills in their studies[3].

1.2   Approach to Course Design

Although it has been stated that the "student as an active learner is not very welcome in most sectors of universities" (Levin & Greenwood, 2001, p. 104), I believe students should be allowed to contribute more to their education than is often the case. If they are allowed a voice, "more effective, efficient, and democratic modes of classroom work" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b, p. 1) can be achieved. Optimising what and how work is undertaken in the classroom is a key element in my teaching since "the number of classroom hours and opportunities for interaction in university language courses are seldom if ever sufficient to provide students with even a fraction of the language that they might need for their studies and life" (Prior, 2018, p. 772). Therefore, a more learner-centred focus to the design of the syllabus, where content and procedures would be negotiated with the students, needed to be integrated into the existing skills-focused syllabus. A learner-centred focus is when "learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content… and how it is taught" (Nunan, 1988, p. 2). One of the advantages of a learner-centred approach to syllabus design, rather than an approach driven by the teacher or institution, is that because the learners play an active role in the decision-making, their direct involvement should lead to the design of a syllabus that is more relevant to their needs.

In order to address this learner-centred perspective, therefore, I chose to use negotiation in the classroom with the students when designing the syllabus.

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3   This section has been adapted from Prior (2018).

Negotiation can be defined as "discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organised" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b, p. 1). The negotiated syllabus therefore

> provides the framework within which either a predesigned content syllabus would be publicly analysed and evaluated by the classroom group, or an emerging content syllabus would be designed (and similarly evaluated) in an ongoing way. (Breen, 1984, p. 55)

As many language learners often only have contact with the target language in a classroom environment, if they are given the opportunity to engage in negotiation regarding the syllabus and the learning process, this will allow them to engage in authentic communication with both the teacher and the other learners so that they will acquire some of the fundamental skills and language that will be needed in other situations where negotiation is required (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c, p. 19). It is therefore through this negotiation that language learning can occur because negotiation is itself a communicative activity. Although it must be recognised that in this context my students do have contact with the target language, given the fact that they are studying at a university and using English as a medium of instruction, it is still important to emphasise that "the classroom is a key context where learner autonomy can be stimulated" (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017, p. 7).

Furthermore, engaging in negotiation would provide students with an opportunity to "take charge of [their] learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3) and as such would be a means to gain greater autonomy. Being allowed to participate in some of the decision-making processes regarding the course's syllabus would offer them a greater stake in their learning. In this way, the syllabus, and by definition the course, would achieve a greater relevance and authenticity in both the content and the language practised, as well as fostering greater learner autonomy.

2. Learner Autonomy and Negotiation – An Overview

The concept of learner autonomy has been widely discussed in language education since the early 1980s when Holec described it as learners taking charge of their own learning so as "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (1981, p. 3). This idea of autonomy originated from the practice of self-directed learning, which is "learning in which the objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined by the learners themselves" (Benson, 2001, p. 8). Self-directed learning in the 1980s mainly developed through resources made available in self-access centres, which, with their extensive collection of language learning resources, "would offer learners the best opportunity for experimentation with self-directed learning" (Benson, 2001, p. 9), although the focus was on learners who had already reached a proficient level in the language they were learning.

Despite the popularity of self-access centres with their materials and resources, there has not been any convincing evidence that self-directed learning alone can develop into learner autonomy and indeed, "under certain conditions, self-instructed modes of learning may even inhibit autonomy" (Benson, 2001, p. 9). Consequently, the pursuit of learner autonomy moved away from the unrealistic assumption that it would develop spontaneously from self-directed learning and concentrated more on learner training, which Holec defined like this:

> The basic methodology for learner training should be that of discovery; the learner should discover, with or without the help of other learners or teachers, the knowledge and the techniques which he needs as he tries to find answers to the problems with which he is faced. By proceeding largely by trial and error he trains himself progressively (1981, p. 42).

Although Holec focused on learners training themselves, the practice of learner training has developed over the years and is no longer confined to self-directed learning, but now tends to be incorporated into classroom learning (Benson, 2001). Learner training can take various forms, including language

awareness training, which focuses on improving the learners' knowledge about the nature of language and acquiring effective learning strategies (Dickinson, 1988, p.46). Learner training is important for all learners but "it is essential for those aiming at some level of autonomy" (Dickinson, 1988, p.46).

The fact, therefore, that autonomy requires learners to take charge of their learning and take responsibility for it has been broadly accepted (Little, 1995; Cotterall, 2000; Benson, 2001), but this view can tend to focus on learners' concurrent language learning. Littlewood (1999) recognises that learner autonomy is a goal that should be reached in order to benefit learners not only during their educational experiences learning languages but subsequent to that:

> If we define autonomy in educational terms as involving students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners everywhere, since it is obvious that no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout life. (Littlewood, 1999, p. 73)

Little (1995) also recognises how acquiring a degree of autonomy benefits learners both during and after their language educational experiences, as they can attain a degree of "pedagogical autonomy" that will be of an advantage in any learning context. However, he also states that "the whole point of developing learner autonomy is to enable learners to become autonomous users of their target language" and therefore exercise "communicative autonomy" (Little, 1995, p. 176). If pedagogical autonomy is encouraged, learners will be able to practise it and make use of it directly during any classroom activities as well as outside the classroom while engaged in their language learning, even if they are unable to exercise communicative autonomy because their language proficiency level is too low. However, as learners increase their language proficiency, pedagogical autonomy, and communicative autonomy will then begin to interact and learners will be more confident when using the target language in contexts away from the classroom than learners who have not practised learner autonomy. Little states that confidence in using the language is crucial for successful language learning:

> this confidence to use the target language in a personally appropriate way is a necessary precondition for, but also the outcome of, the kind of communicative activity that gradually but ineluctably promotes second language development. It is the single most impressive achievement of successful projects to promote learner autonomy. (Little, 1995, p. 176)

Moreover, fostering learner autonomy can be seen as being even more desirable now than in the past, given how English has become so pervasive in so many contexts, whether they be cultural, social, educational or technological. The use and learning of English in the globalised world are ever-changing due to the rapid growth of communication technologies and the omnipresence of the internet, which has provided language learners with an infinite supply of input, stimulus, and communicative opportunities. Waters (2012), in his review of English language teaching (ELT) methodology, states that "the increasing ubiquity of web-based language teaching and learning resources has the potential to redistribute the balance between teacher-led and learner-based instruction" (2012, p. 448). As a consequence, learners have more opportunities than ever to work more independently, whether that be explicitly in language learning environments, or in their every-day lives. Moreover, the assumption that the English we use today can be represented by a homogenous and monolingual culture is clearly irrational, given the global status that English now enjoys. Illés refers specifically to the established but unrepresentative native-speaker models that have traditionally been used, and to a certain extent are still used, in ELT, but which can no longer be considered appropriate for 21st century English-language learners who have to operate in a globalised world where English is used so prevalently. She therefore believes that "the task of language education is… to help learners develop self-reliance and autonomy, which will enable them to communicate successfully in international settings" (Illés, 2012, p. 506). These developments make it fundamental that there is a focus on ways to foster learner autonomy in any context where a syllabus, especially a learner-centred syllabus, is being designed and implemented in English-language courses.

Cotterall agrees that learner autonomy should be integrated into classroom practice and she focuses particularly on how teachers can help foster learner autonomy in their courses. She states that

> Language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy will incorporate means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner. (Cotterall, 2000, p. 109–110)

This approach, therefore, regards the learner as a decision-maker who has a certain amount of control over aspects of the learning process, and Benson states this explicitly: "the key factor in the development of autonomy is the opportunity for students to make decisions regarding their learning within a collaborative and supportive environment" (2001, p. 151). Allwright also believes that autonomy is fostered when teachers reflect on whether the decisions they normally take should be taken by the learners instead. Typically these decisions concern the planning of classroom activities and the evaluation of their outcomes (1979, p. 105), but Cotterall asserts the real challenge for course designers is "to find ways of supporting the transfer of responsibility for decision-making about learning from teacher to learner" (2000, p. 110). She further states that if learner autonomy is to be achieved, the course must address the language learning goals that learners have established:

> in a course which seeks to foster language learners' autonomy, time is devoted to raising learners' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, identifying resources and strategies needed to achieve goals, and measuring progress. Decisions about language, texts, tasks, and strategies to focus on during the course are made in relation to the stated goals of the learners. (Cotterall, 2000, p. 109–110)

This approach implies that the teacher and the learners should engage in activities that will allow the learners to express their needs and interests and provide opportunities for reflective feedback, both from the teacher and the learners. In her discussion of the context in which her study occurred, this is effectively what happened, as her learners, all low-level adult learners, were initially asked to set goals for the course, were encouraged to keep learner

journals, had regular interviews with the teachers and engaged in ongoing reflection both with their teachers and their peers (Cotterall 2000). Moreover, many tasks in class were developed based on the individual learner's goals and future communication situations so that "rather than having to create links between pedagogic tasks and their own needs, learners instead practised tasks associated with their target situations, and received feedback on their performance" (Cotterall, 2000, p. 114). Therefore, although not once does she refer to a negotiated syllabus, the approach she describes is almost identical to general models of the negotiated syllabus presented in the literature (Breen, 1987; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c; Slembrouck, 2000; Breen, 2001). However, she does refer to the process that was undertaken and states that it

> presented the learners with a means of meeting their own needs. By making the language learning process salient, the course helped learners understand and manage their learning in a way which contributed to their performance in specific language tasks (Cotterall, 2000, p. 115)

Cotterall's study focused initially on learners establishing their own learning goals as a means to foster learner autonomy, but she makes no mention of a negotiated syllabus. Other studies also implemented approaches where learners took responsibility for decision-making regarding their learning (Dam 1995; Hall & Kenny, 1988; Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund 1997) and the syllabus models used were very similar to the negotiated syllabus, although the term *negotiated syllabus* was never used. Therefore, a clear link between promoting learner autonomy within a negotiated syllabus was not made in these accounts.

Bloor & Bloor, however, establish a clear link between learner autonomy and a negotiated syllabus in their paper entitled "Syllabus negotiation: the basis of learner autonomy." They describe syllabus negotiation as an "approach to helping students arrive at the position of being able to understand and articulate their language learning objectives" (Bloor & Bloor, 1988, p. 62) and they regard syllabus negotiation as a crucial way to encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning, the fundamental premise of learner autonomy:

> Whether it be with an individual in a self access programme or with a group of students in a conventionally taught course, negotiating the syllabus is the first step towards full responsibility (Bloor & Bloor, 1988, p. 65)

In their account of a negotiated syllabus for an academic writing course at the University of Warwick, they identify the limits that the context presented, compared to the self-access courses to which they also refer. In the case of the self-access courses, they were able to negotiate the "broad objectives" of the course due to the individual nature of the courses, whereas with the courses taught, they identify that it is the "details" that can be negotiated (Bloor & Bloor, 1988, p. 70). This account and its approach follow a similar approach to that presented by Breen and Littlejohn (2000a), where negotiation that takes place in the classroom can relate to the content, the language learning procedures, the goals, and even how these or other aspects are assessed. Breen and Littlejohn see this process as a cycle where decisions are negotiated initially about one or more aspects relating to the classroom work in the initial stage, actions are taken to implement those decisions in the next stage and then there is an evaluation phase where both the learning outcomes and the process that led to those outcomes are evaluated.

Therefore, this demonstrates that promoting learner autonomy often follows a very similar framework to that of the negotiated syllabus and that the concept of learner autonomy is inextricably linked to that of the negotiated syllabus as Bloor & Bloor state:

> Syllabus negotiation increases students' understanding of the nature of language in use and of the learning process; it helps them to become aware of the facilities available in the immediate context of the university and in the wider context of society; it improves their ability to formulate their learning goals; and, above all, it enables them to begin to take control of their own learning, breaking out of the cocoon of dependence on the teacher. Once this has happened, negotiation inevitably becomes an ongoing process. It is thus that the foundations of autonomy are laid. (1988, p. 73)

To sum up, therefore, promoting learner autonomy plays a significant role in the syllabus that was designed and implemented for the ESAP course that was

the subject of my research. Fostering learner autonomy is crucial for three reasons: first, it prepares students for when they will no longer have a teacher accompanying them in later learning experiences; second, it enables the teacher to optimise the little time available in class (see Cotterall 2000, p. 115); third, it empowers learners to engage in beneficial communicative activities.

3. Research Methodology and Participants

In order to redesign the syllabus for the ESAP course in question, a thorough needs assessment and analysis were undertaken by using a mixed methods research design. Needs assessment requires information about learners, and Carkin states clearly that "needs assessment of the diverse learners in EAP underlies syllabus design" (2005, p. 87). However, as the aim was to establish a learner-centred approach to syllabus design, I wanted the students to be involved from the beginning. Therefore, quantitative data were collected from the students who were attending, had attended or who would attend the ESAP course from an online questionnaire, which was administered over three academic years. In total 365 responses were collected. However, the aim of the study was to gain as many insights as possible into the English being used at the Faculty and any problems students may have been encountering while studying in English. Therefore, just approaching the students to provide data would have excluded an important target population: the lecturers who use EMI in the courses they teach. As at the time of the study there were only ten lecturers who taught in English, qualitative data were collected from them in the form of semi-structured interviews. Once the data were collected and analysed, the results were merged with the data gathered from the students to achieve triangulation. Triangulation has been defined as

> intentionally using more than one method of data collection and analysis when studying a social phenomenon so as to seek convergence and corroboration between the results obtained from different methods, thereby eliminating the bias inherent in the use of a single method (Riazi & Candlin, 2014, p. 144)

The use of triangulation thus aims to lead to a fuller understanding of the subject under investigation, particularly when there is a variety of data sources and data collection methods, as was the case in this study.

4. Results and Implementation of Syllabus

4.1 Findings from Data Analysis

The data collected from the students and EMI lecturers aimed to identify different aspects relating to the subjects taught in English including the skills used in the courses, the levels of language proficiency required in the different courses, and what problems students were perceived to encounter in an EMI context. These findings were then integrated into the design of the modified syllabus for the ESAP course.

The analysis of the data from the questionnaires highlighted the fact that the students' self-reported proficiency levels in the receptive skills (listening and reading) were higher than their levels in the productive skills (speaking and writing). As can be seen in Figure 1 below, the students' self-reported levels in reading and listening were more often C1 whereas in speaking and writing there was a tendency to rate themselves at B2 (or lower).
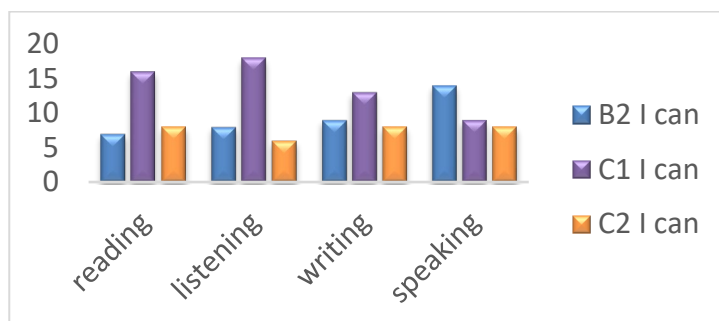

Figure 1 – Self-reported levels in the 4 skills based on adapted "I can" statements from the CEFR

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Comparing the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with the EMI lecturers, there seemed to be broad agreement amongst the lecturers that writing and speaking were the weaker skills. An example of a comment from the lecturers included the following, which referred to speaking:

> I think the first and the main [problem for students] is not an adequate level of the knowledge of the language which allows you to communicate freely and not to feel sort of you know afraid from asking the questions and so on

Another lecturer highlighted the problems some students faced with writing:

> they just don't know… they write in German or Italian with English words of course. So they don't know what an English sentence is, they don't know how to connect two sentences, many of them… the fact that how a sentence is meant to be connected in order for an English eye to make sense of what is written.

The merging of the two datasets demonstrated that there had been general agreement concerning the skills needed to follow the courses taught in English successfully and both the students and the EMI lecturers had identified that speaking and writing were the weaker skills. Consequently, in order to meet these needs, I decided to focus on providing more skills practice, particularly in speaking and writing, during the ESAP course and therefore the syllabus had to be modified to reflect these findings.

4.2   Integration of Negotiation into the Syllabus

As stated previously, one reason I chose to use negotiation in the ESAP course was as a means to promote learner autonomy. From a pedagogical perspective, the value of using negotiation in the classroom creates opportunities for learners to engage in authentic communication. Therefore, the modified syllabus not only needed to provide opportunities to improve and practise the productive skills, it also needed to integrate opportunities for negotiation so that authentic communication would take place. However, the crucial question arose as to what parts of the course could be negotiated with the students. Wette (2011, p. 137) notes that "pure" versions of a negotiated syllabus, where

all the decisions about the course from content, procedures, and elation means are negotiated with the learners, are virtually non-existent, which is echoed by Breen & Littlejohn (2000c, p. 30) who state "it would be highly unusual and inefficient for a classroom group to seek negotiated agreement on all of the major questions in every lesson, even if this was feasible." Breen & Littlejohn therefore suggest that a negotiated syllabus should be interpreted as a framework for decision-making, which implies that the number and type of decisions open to negotiation can and will differ greatly from context to context (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c, p. 29). Consequently, decisions can range from the widest context possible, the entire curriculum, to the narrowest at the single task level (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c, p. 35).

Given these considerations and the limitations that existed in the context, I decided to allow the students to negotiate the content of and procedures for the coursework-based component of the ESAP course, the so-called Portfolio. This choice to negotiate the Portfolio originated from the fact that much of the rest of the ESAP course's contents and procedures could not be negotiated. The assessment means – a written exam and an oral exam – were established by the Faculty and could not be altered. The number of hours for the course was also a given. The focus of the course contents – on specific language for academic purposes for economics students – was also pre-set. The Portfolio, however, was my attempt to distribute some of the final exam marks onto work that was produced away from exam conditions, in order to make the task more authentic academically and promote personal study and research skills. As such, therefore, its design was more suitable to being negotiated with the students.

4.3   The Portfolio

The Portfolio was – and still is – work that is completed by each student during the course outside of class time and was based on the book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Levitt and Dubner (2005 and successive editions). The book had been used in previous years and feedback from those students had been almost wholly positive. Therefore, I

took the decision to maintain this source material, but would allow the students to negotiate the contents of the Portfolio, the length of the Portfolio and the task types included in the Portfolio.

The students were informed in the first class that there would be the opportunity to undertake this negotiation and that they should acquire the book and read the 15-page introduction in preparation for the "Negotiated Portfolio class." On the day of this class, students were provided with a worksheet (see example in appendix A) and were first asked to list their strengths and weaknesses in English as a means to encourage them to reflect on their own language needs. Then they were asked to work in small groups (between 2 and 4 people) and discuss the questions on the worksheet, thus giving them a framework for their discussions, but otherwise allowing them freedom to discuss. As Chappell remarks, "when teachers relax the framing of the pedagogic discourse in small group interactions, they allow students to develop their oral fluency" (2014, p. 111), which was one of the aims of the skills-based focus of the syllabus. The students were asked to discuss the contents of the Portfolio, in other words, which chapters or topics they regarded would be useful to work on and to discuss the procedures related to the Portfolio including how many questions there would be, how many words they would write, the type of writing tasks they felt would be useful, as well as how the tasks would be assessed. Once they had discussed in small groups, the whole class came together, each group summarised what they had discussed and then, with me, we negotiated the final version. This final version, which had been designed to have a variety of questions based on various chapters of the book, *Freakonomics*, provided students with a certain degree of autonomy to pick and choose the questions they preferred to focus on. Moreover, an open question analysing aspects of the book, which could be interpreted and answered in a variety of ways, provided additional freedom for each student to tailor the Portfolio to their own interests and skills. In this way, although the Portfolio was based on exactly the same source material, the choice available of question types and content focus contributed to each Portfolio produced being completely individual.

4.4   Evaluation of the Negotiated Portfolio

As a follow-up to this class, I asked students to complete a survey about the negotiation process and especially I asked them "Do you think it's a good idea for you to be able to negotiate the contents of (some of) your course?" Of the 105 students who responded, 101 answered *yes*. They were then asked to explain why they felt it was a good idea and using a thematic analysis, the answers were coded and integrated into a conceptual framework as can be seen in Figure 2.
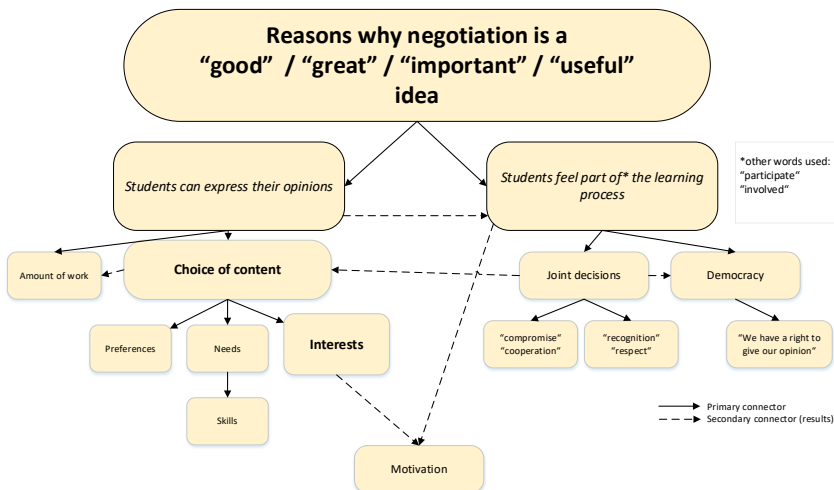

Figure 2 – Conceptual framework visualising the students' responses

The conceptual framework visualises the answers given to the question. The main category at the top is the answer to the question, and apart from the responses saying negotiation was a "good" idea, other adjectives were also used, as can be seen. The reasons why students thought negotiation was a good idea were divided into two main categories, which were coded as *Students can express their opinions*, to reflect the more practical, yet relational aspect of the students' responses, while others concentrated on the more participatory aspects of negotiation and so this category was coded *Students feel part of the learning process*. The *Students can express their opinions* category was

divided into what students could express their opinions about, which comprised two main elements—the amount of work to be undertaken and the contents of the course. Students had tended to complain about the amount of work expected for this ESAP course in the past, so reference to the workload is not surprising.

However, the majority of students who stated that negotiation was a good idea because they could express their opinions tended to refer to the contents of the course, as the question that they were answering had suggested. This aspect was actually coded 25 times. To highlight the importance of this aspect, therefore, the *Choice of content* category in the conceptual framework is significantly larger than the *Amount of work* category. The *Choice of content* category is further subdivided into three subcategories that comprise the aspects that the students mentioned about being able to choose the content. Using a word frequency analysis, the reference to content that was "interesting" or that students were "interested in" was coded 30 times. In other words almost a third of the survey responses agreed that being able to negotiate the contents of their course was a good idea because they could negotiate content that they personally found interesting. As this was by far the most frequent reason stated, its visualisation as the subcategory in the conceptual framework is larger than the other two explanations, which were coded as reflecting the "needs" of the students and their "preferences." The "needs" subcategory is the only one that contains a further element, which is a reference to skills work, which was explicitly mentioned in two responses.

A significant aspect that emerges from this analysis is that the students seemed to appreciate deciding on content connected with their own interests rather than with their language learning or academic needs. It has been recognised for a long time in ESP that needs can comprise "necessities, lacks, and wants" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 55), where the necessities refer to the objective needs of the target situation, lacks are what the learners do not yet know, and wants are more the subjective needs of the learners. Hyland also focuses on the multifaceted aspects of needs:

> Needs is actually an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate in. (2006, p. 73)

The students in this study, therefore, seemed to particularly value negotiation to achieve their more subjective needs based on their personal interests.

The other main category that answered the question in the survey was coded as "Students feel part of the learning process" in an attempt to capture the more participatory aspects of negotiation. As the students used various expressions to refer to this category, the conceptual framework notes the other words used, which were "participate" and other forms of this lexeme, and "involved" as in the following examples:

> "Because [negotiation] enhances… participation of the students"
> "A person should always be able to participate in a discussion and negotiate for the desired aims"
> "I believe [negotiation] makes students more involved"
> "[negotiation] is a good way to involve the students and to let them express their opinions"

Many students did not go beyond expressing anything further than what was coded as *Students feel part of the learning process*, but some did elaborate on the theme. Therefore the two subcategories of *joint decisions* and *democracy* were integrated to reflect these aspects. One example that was coded as "joint decisions" was the following statement:

> students and professors often have different expectations of the portfolio, so they can explain them to each other, find a compromise

An example that was coded in the *democracy* category is the one that appears in the conceptual framework, where one respondent stated, "We have a right to give our opinion."

Given the fact that many of the categories that were generated in the coding of the survey responses tended to intermingle, these relationships are shown in the conceptual framework with the connecting lines. Therefore, the solid lines show the primary connectors in the categories, whereas the dotted lines show secondary connectors, which always refer to a result. To exemplify this, the statement below was coded as *joint decisions*, but the result is *choice of content*:

> I think it is a good idea because the professor can understand the interests of the students and take them into account during the preparation of the lectures

The final category visualised in the conceptual framework is *motivation*, which, although appearing explicitly six times, always appeared as a consequence of one of the other categories. In the following statement, for example, motivation comes from the interest: "if students find [the course] interesting, they will have more motivation to do it", whereas another referred to the motivation coming from the ability to choose: "if we can negotiate the contents we can choose topics which we like and we are more motivated." This finding corresponds with the idea that learners who take responsibility for their own learning have a greater likelihood of reaching their learning goals, and this is linked to motivation issues, as these learners tend to "maintain a positive attitude to learning in the future" (Little, 1995, p. 176).

5. Conclusions

This chapter has provided a brief presentation of an ESAP course at the Faculty of Economics and Management at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano whose syllabus was modified so that students were given the opportunity to negotiate some of the contents and procedures relating to the course. By providing the students with more decision-making powers than is normally envisaged or encouraged in an undergraduate university course, they were able to choose content that they identified was more interesting for them, and they were also able to influence the amount of work they had to do for

the Portfolio. This approach to syllabus design not only allowed the students to focus on more skills practice than there had been previously, especially writing and speaking, but also to exercise greater learner autonomy through the process of negotiation. As "at the heart of learner autonomy is the concept of choice" (Cotterall, 2000, p. 111), negotiation allowed students to be part of the decision-making process and provided a solid opportunity for them to develop their learner autonomy. This increased level of learner autonomy also had an impact on one of the main precepts of ESP, which "is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19). Because the students were provided with opportunities to develop their autonomy, which allowed them to tailor the course more closely to their perceived language learning needs, using negotiation in the ESAP classroom can therefore be regarded as an effective strategy to address this fundamental principle of ESP.

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Appendix

Negotiated Portfolio

A Yourself

1. Think about your own strengths and weaknesses in English. Try to list them:

Strengths	Weaknesses

After having read the contents pages and introduction to the book *Freakonomics*, preview the rest briefly and answer the following questions. Be ready to discuss your views in the second half of this class.

B Freakonomics

2. Make a list of the topics covered in the book. Are any of them irrelevant to your interests or needs?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Are there parts of the book that you could read and benefit from (either language or content-wise) without support from this class?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

C The Portfolio

4. Given the limited time available for a 3-credit point course like this one, which parts of *Freakonomics* would you prefer to study for the Portfolio?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Given that writing has been identified as a general problem for Economics and Management students, what writing tasks based on the parts of the book you have identified in question 4 would be useful for you to do for the Portfolio?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. How many writing tasks could you do for this Portfolio? (consider the number of words for ease of reference and discussion)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Which parts of the book you have identified in question 4 would be better to deal with in class orally?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Do you have any other suggestions/requests relating to this Portfolio?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Adapted from Hedge, T. 2000. *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: OUP   Jemma Prior