

- Yes, thanks. Let's go to 'Mario's'.

...

Ring, ring, ring. . .

- 317045, hello?

- Sheila?

- Oh! Hi, Mike, where are you right now? . . .

*Fragment 3: from 'Dr. Ameinsanhaven's fauna' by David Arrufat, Xavier Heredia, Carlos D. Fernández, Guillem Formiguera*

Let me explain a curious event. It was February sixth at five o'clock. I was working in the garden when my father called me. I went to him and he gave me a box that had been posted in Germany. I was very surprised. I went to my room where, immediately, I opened it. In the little box there were three packets. Each one had a number written in red colour. I took the first. It was a letter. I opened it. It was an English letter; I gave it to my father because I had never studied English, I prefer German. My father started to read it.

'On February first, 1988, Dr. Peter Ameinsanhaven has died.'

My blood stopped, but in a moment it started running again. Peter was my old and favourite uncle. He lived in Germany and I visited him every summer. He was a slightly crazy scientist. This year he should have celebrated his ninetieth birthday. My father continued the horrible letter.

'I, public prosecutor of Gelsenkirchen, communicate to you that your uncle in his will, has left you these two packets. Nobody has opened them because this was your uncle's desire.'

## 5 'We do what we like': negotiated classroom work with Hungarian children

Marianne Nikolov

This chapter is intended to provide insights into the day-to-day implementation of the process syllabus in the teaching of English as a foreign language to children between the ages of six and 14. Because of this wide age range, a focus of the chapter will be some of the changes in negotiation due to age. A further focus will be on how aspects of classroom procedures and content are negotiated and how feedback from the children is obtained and acted on.

### Subjects

The study which this chapter builds on was conducted over the last 20 years. It involved three groups of children from the age of six up to 14. The children were learning English at a primary school affiliated to Janus Pannonius University, Pécs, Hungary. The first experimental group of 15 six-year-old children started in 1977. After an eight-year pilot period the second group of 15 learners started in 1985. Another 15 children were involved in a third group between 1987 and 1995. Altogether 20 girls and 25 boys have participated for the full length of each of the eight-year periods. Five children out of the first group came from disadvantaged families and the parents of only two had learnt English. In the second and third groups two and three subjects respectively came from disadvantaged families and five and six parents respectively had some background in English. Most of the children came from middle-class families and their parents wanted them to study English. The school is situated in a not very well established neighbourhood in the city centre of Pécs, Hungary. Most of the students live in the district but many of them commute from other parts of the town for the sake of the English programme. Children had two classes per week in the first two grades, three classes in the third and fourth grades, and four classes between the ages of 10 and 14. The teacher, syllabus designer and researcher was the same person throughout, viz the author.

This account is based upon reflective research as I have worked through and developed the programme for the whole period.

### Background to the study

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners was introduced in an experimental class in 1977. The programme was initiated by the Ministry of Education, but their support was withdrawn after three years. At that time Russian was the compulsory foreign language; all children were supposed to begin Russian at the age of 10. However, a few specialised schools introduced English or German at the earlier age of eight.

Recently, the general situation has changed: Russian is no longer compulsory and English programmes have mushroomed all over the country (for a summary, see Medgyes, 1993). Schools are required to develop their own curricula based on the New National Curriculum but, to my knowledge, syllabuses are rarely negotiated.

In most cases syllabus design means the adaptation of published teaching materials, spiced with some supplementary materials, and children are not involved in any kind of decision-making. Teachers tend to stick to their syllabuses because they see them as prescribed documents and learners' expressed needs are not usually taken into consideration. The same syllabus is used with gifted, mixed-ability and low-ability children but the achievements of each group are different.

Teachers are required to assess children from the very first school year. Hungarian children are graded on a system of 1 to 5: mark 5 is the best and mark 1 means complete failure. Most teachers of younger children develop cumulative systems of assessment in which children receive small rewards, such as red points and, after gaining five such points, students are awarded a mark 5. Negative feedback accumulates along the same principles: lack of homework, inattention and a high number of mistakes in tasks result in low marks. Good marks are extremely important both to children and parents as these represent progress in studies and determine access to different types of secondary schools. Formal testing is, however, generally infrequent; consequently a few test results determine the final grade at the end of the term. As a result of these facts, children hate and fear tests.

### Negotiation in the classroom

Two reasons are mentioned by Breen for the introduction of the process syllabus: '[It] provides the framework within which either a pre-designed 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: 55). In this study the aim of negotiation with the first experimental group was the design of an emerging story-based syllabus; in the second and third groups this syllabus was evaluated and further developed.

The purpose of the early English project was to develop and pilot materials, tasks and teaching techniques for children between six and 14. As no ready-made materials or teaching techniques were available, the most appropriate way of developing the syllabus, for me, was negotiation with children.

Another reason for negotiating the syllabus was my own inexperience as a teacher. It was my very first teaching experience after graduation from college and, although I had never heard of process syllabuses or negotiation in the classroom, I relied on the children involved as much as possible since the syllabus was to be designed for them. I felt it a personal challenge to find out about children's likes and dislikes, and how they acquired English in the classroom. Negotiation is not used in Hungarian schools and my inexperience turned out to be useful: I found that the usual rigid teacher-directed, classroom routine could be avoided. As a result of inquiring about children's attitudes, a story-based content syllabus with playful language-teaching techniques was developed.

Decisions are usually taken by teachers: they determine what students do and how they do it, and evaluative feedback is also provided by the teacher. Children have only one choice: whether they participate or not. Breen (1984) identifies three major elements of classroom work where decisions have to be made: participation, procedure and subject matter. I describe below the procedures I adopted with the children with reference to these three areas of decision-making. Student assessment is not usually explicitly negotiated in school, but I have seen it as having an important role in my own work. These four aspects are explored across the different age ranges.

### Participation

Issues related to participation relate to two questions: 'Who wants to participate in a particular activity?' and 'Who wants to work with

whom?' With respect to the choice of participation, young learners often feel shy and would like to see first how the activity goes, or they are unhappy and would like to withdraw. Most of the children have special favourites, while some of them particularly dislike one of the activities. There were several boys who never wanted to play singing games as they thought 'Lucy Locket' was only for girls, but they always wanted to play 'What's the time, Mr Wolf?' and other games with a lot of physical movements. After introducing the activity the teacher can ask children whether they want to participate in that particular game or task. One way of doing this is asking for volunteers, children who want to join in, while the others may choose to do something else, e.g. observe, colour or draw pictures. The other way is voting on the activity. Children are asked 'Who wants to do it?' and, if the majority votes for it, they are all asked to do it. At first this rule does not work very well with young students but after a few months they understand it and they start persuading each other to vote for what they want to do. The most democratic outcome is usually suggested by the children themselves: 'Let's do this first, and then what the others would like.' I adopted this principle from their suggestion and in most of the cases it works.

The situation is fairly similar up to the age of 12, children rarely choose not to participate but in such cases they like peers to invite them. There are no children who regularly withdraw, except for team competitions. Children who are chosen last by captains develop inhibitions and do not want to participate. An eight-year-old boy suggested that the ones chosen last should be the captains the following time. His suggestion was adapted and this way uncomfortable situations could be avoided and students did not mind being last.

Around puberty some girls develop inhibitions and they always choose not to participate in any role play if they are to be watched by the others. I asked them for suggestions and they came up with two rules:

1. only volunteers act out, and the ones who don't feel like performing need not;
2. if they still feel they want to be marked on the role play they may choose their audience for the break, sometimes only the teacher.

In these cases before or after classes, while the other students are out of the classroom, these students would perform in front of the limited audience of their own choice.

As for who works with whom, children in all three groups liked to choose their partners and after the age of eight or nine they hardly tolerated pressure. Due to aptitude differences and discipline problems,

sometimes low achievers or aggressive children are not chosen. Two ways of avoiding embarrassing situations have been developed. Children volunteering to tutor a classmate who has fallen behind get a reward every time their partner improves a subskill. They fill in missing letters, dictate to one another, play guessing games, act out, develop puzzles for partners and are motivated to collaborate. Sometimes children find this patronising or irritating, mostly boys with girls, but several girls have developed long-lasting friendships through this technique. When two more gifted girls have worked with a less gifted one, over the years the differences may disappear.

The other way of avoiding embarrassing situations is based on coincidence or chance; for example, with a counting rhyme, or numbers picked at random from a hat, or ends of strings taken without seeing who the one holding the other end is. Young children enjoy these solutions but with adolescents it may cause trouble when one or more children decide not to participate after finding out who they are supposed to work with. In these cases they usually choose to do another activity by themselves or the group persuades them to join in. After such occasions they tend to vote for choosing partners on their own and they come to class with decisions made among them.

### Procedure

Several aspects of procedure have been touched upon in the previous review. In what follows some further information will be provided concerning how tasks and activities are negotiated and in what ways students contribute to the choices.

Young children are usually offered choices: 'Would you like to play the card game with the animal cards or the clothes cards?'; 'Shall we sit on the floor or do you want to sit on your chairs?'; 'Would you like a guessing game or a puzzle?'; 'Shall we play "Simon says" now, or do you want me to go on with the story first? This way they feel involved in decision-making and in most of the cases they vote for both; in this way negotiation influences the sequence of activities. Around the age of eight some children come up with suggestions: 'Let's go on with the story'; 'I have a puzzle, can I put it on the board?' In these cases we usually strike a bargain: they would like to do something and I say 'Yes, we can, if we do all I think we need to do first.' That way we can save time for the desired activity, which is the best way of avoiding discipline problems due to boredom.

Children often contribute by bringing favourite animals, toys or books, drawing pictures, developing crossword puzzles, fill-in-the-slot

tasks, jumbled words or sentences, or by writing their own stories. The only drawback to using materials supplied by children is that the others sometimes find these tasks unclear or misleading so they argue and may disappoint each other. This difficulty can be easily avoided by consulting children before they present tasks for the others. Some children develop special expertise in some areas. One girl in the first and second groups produced a crossword puzzle for each class from the second grade up to the last class in the eighth grade. Another girl in the third group became hooked on word chains and produced half a page of them for each class in the last four years. Children automatically receive rewards for these extra tasks, although not all of them are aware of the possibility. A problematic boy in the seventh grade realised only after almost seven years that he could also gain rewards in this way. He developed 11 puzzles within two weeks, and later he prepared one every week to ensure a regular good mark.

Up to the age of 10 children have rarely turned any of my offers down. After this age they sometimes vote against my suggestions and they are even more critical of peer suggestions. In the fifth grade they tend to decide not to sing songs or play games with physical movements. In the seventh and eighth grades they do not want to play 'Bingo' through guessing meanings of words from contexts to be written in a chart, but want synonyms and antonyms instead. They suggest doing writing and reading tasks either in pairs (when it is meant to be an individual activity and vice versa) or as homework so that they can go on with the classroom activity instead. Sometimes they ask for a copy of the next chapter of a story and choose to read it themselves instead of listening to it, or they don't want to elaborate on a prediction task as they are too eager to know more of the story. Negotiation in these cases is usually triggered by my offer of options on which all children are asked to vote. Sometimes one or more students suggest an activity and they want to involve the others in the decision-making by asking for voting. In all cases the wish of the majority determines what should happen.

### Subject matter

Students have been involved in making decisions on the content with which we work. The story-based syllabus is built on a sequence of rhymes, songs and stories, together with games and tasks associated with them. The most important reasons for the development of the story-based syllabus are the following. Children find rhymes, songs, picture stories, fairy tales, adventure stories and thrillers intrinsically

motivating, thus these authentic English sources offer relevant content areas for an EFL course. Children are familiar with similar materials, sometimes even with the same story, in their mother tongue. Tasks associated with stories are cognitively familiar, meaningful and context embedded. All language functions and formal aspects of language are available in stories from authentic sources. Stories lend themselves to adaptation easily and contribute to the development of both the receptive and expressive skills. As the syllabus is based on stories, children have contributed by suggesting stories (such as their own picture books which can be told as a story), by suggesting new story books and by choosing from my offers. In the first two or three grades they enjoy listening to the same story several times and they vote for their choice and we retell the ones most of them want. In the fourth, fifth and sixth grades they still feel happy with the teacher's choice and suggest their own books less frequently, mostly because they realise that the books should be in English and they have limited access to them. When a story is finished, children are asked how much they enjoyed it and why. As for the next choice, they either want something exactly like the one we have just finished or something completely different. Sometimes they suggest a pop song or want to do a project on a particular topic. I need to make sure that wishes of both boys and girls are granted: after 'Cinderella', 'The Wizard of Oz' or 'Babysitting is a Dangerous Job' - which are considered 'girlish' stories - they tend to vote for a story considered more 'boyish', like 'Pinocchio', 'Doctor Dolittle' or 'Run for your Life'. As negotiation becomes routine in the classroom the teacher has to be prepared for the possibility of her or his offers being turned down. I have tried to read 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' to all three groups in the seventh grade without success. Every time I offered it in a choice of three novels, another story was always chosen.

Sometimes children suggest the *type* of story they would like: in the third group in January they wanted a horror story, so they chose from 'Dracula', 'Frankenstein' and 'The Canterville Ghost', but after that story they voted for a detective story rather than either of the other two.

Once you start negotiation on likes and dislikes you cannot stop, and sometimes this can lead to unexpected issues being raised by children. In the sixth grade we worked on 'Jack and the Beanstalk': we dramatised it, put it on stage, and parents came to watch their children. After this success it seemed the right time for evaluation and I asked learners for their opinion concerning how much they had benefited from the experience. All the children sounded enthusiastic until one of the boys, a very scholarly one, raised his hand and said in Hungarian, 'I wonder how useful Jack and the Beanstalk is going to be if I want to travel to

the USA? All the students gaped at me and I asked him what suggestion he would like to make. He wanted 'proper' grammar instruction, like the other grades in school. I was still thinking about the most relevant answer when the other children commented, 'When Jack went up to the other world and asked the way, it was like in New York.' And another one added, 'If you don't like Jack and the Beanstalk you can join the other group and do Project English.' I asked the children how many of them wanted more explicit grammar explanations and exercises. Two girls pointed out that it might be useful in secondary school. Since that time we have been doing some follow-up tasks on grammar points; however, this poor boy still received the blame every time, even when some of the other children ask for them, because these kinds of tasks are not among their favourite activities.

### Role of mother tongue

As negotiation is almost impossible in the target language, in the initial stages Hungarian is used. Children will understand the routine questions in English after one or two times but they will answer in the mother tongue and this second phase lasts two or three years. In the last three grades most of the students are able to discuss, bargain and argue in English, and this is clearly a part of the language syllabus. If they cannot express what they would like to say, they switch back to Hungarian, however, I always answer in English. If they try to say something that they should be able to express in English, they are asked to do so. In problem situations I ask fellow students what they think the other person is trying to say. They either help the student out in English, or offer their own opinion on the topic. In some cases students who want to avoid English are asked to postpone what they want to say, and they can always speak Hungarian in the break.

### Assessment

As children are to be given marks, they are involved in the negotiation of assessment procedures as well. First of all they need to assess themselves. At the age of six they are asked after each class whether they think they have deserved a reward. They look at each other, and then the ones who have considered it and still think they deserve one draw the reward (red points, little hearts) in their own notebook which is used for drawing and keeping track of rewards. Each child is responsible for the 'book-keeping' of his or her rewards or, in the upper

grades, their marks. In the first grade sometimes a child gains so much pleasure from drawing rewards that they somehow multiply. The others usually notice it and then I ask this person to count carefully and keep as many as he or she is sure to have deserved. In the case of some children not behaving appropriately, a boy suggested they should lose one of their rewards. If they feel it is just, they need to cross off one of their own red points. Sometimes they ask me to allow them to keep the red point and promise to deserve two the following time. Usually it works out well.

Every month children are asked in Hungarian how they assess themselves, and they like to comment on each other as well. They are to tell us if they are trying hard enough and where they feel their strengths and weaknesses are. Generally they tend to underestimate their own work and like to hear remarks of praise from peers and encouragement from me. This is part of the general evaluation procedure when they are asked for their views about classroom activities, materials and the teacher. As for testing, they can suggest the time of testing, and they can ask for more practice in certain areas; they often suggest what should and what should not be included in the test. I always give them a mark on their first trial, and if children feel they would like to give it another chance they can try again, self-correct, and the better result is the one recorded. From the very first moment of writing they are asked to check their own work and self-correct. I indicate how many problems there are and in which areas, and they have to find the mistakes and correct them. Sometimes they ask to be allowed to use sources and in most of the cases they can do so, except for tasks when they need to remember accurately; for example, in dictation or a test on vocabulary. Tests are evaluated on the spot and children check their own results in a different colour. This is very useful for sorting out misunderstandings or solutions which I had not thought of but which are nevertheless creative and acceptable. Final marks at the end of the term are also negotiated and individual children are asked to suggest them; the others are also asked their opinion. Children are to tell us what final grade they think they deserve and why. Their suggestions are very often realistic and relevant.

Negotiation on assessment is based on trust. Children know that they are trusted and they try very hard to come up to expectations. Whenever it occurs to any student that one of them may have cheated, I emphasise the importance of trust and ask the particular child if we still have a reason to trust him or her. Another strategy is to take the responsibility myself. In a case where I feel dissatisfied with learners and they also feel slightly guilty, I always try to take the responsibility by asking them what I should have done differently or how I could help in the future.

### **Formal feedback**

Towards the end of each school year children are asked to fill in a questionnaire in Hungarian, anonymously. The following six questions are asked:

- Why do you learn English?
- What are your first three favourite school subjects?
- What are the school subjects (if any) you dislike?
- What do you enjoy doing the most in the English classes?
- What do you dislike (related to English)?
- If you were the teacher what would you do differently?

The first three questions are meant to tap attitudes towards and motivation for English, whereas the other questions aim at eliciting concrete information on what activities children like, dislike and in what ways the teacher should adapt to their needs.

Detailed analysis of the findings can be found in Nikolov (1994); here only findings relevant to negotiation are mentioned. One of the reasons why children think they study English is that they feel they do what they like. As for the question inquiring about concerns and suggestions, results differ according to age. In the first two grades very few children gave an answer and all of them indicated everything was good the way it was. In the third, fourth and fifth grades about half of those questioned were pleased with everything, whereas some would not make children write tests, and others would send children who misbehave out of the class. In the last three grades, half of the students would not change anything, some would punish the ones who have not done homework and the misbehaving children, and many would not require a home assignment. All of the children in the third group in the study would do more grammar and have more horror stories, and some would allow eating during class.

### **Conclusion**

What are the outcomes of this project? First, negative outcomes should be mentioned. As English was the only school subject where negotiation was integrated, children often faced rejection as they tried to come up with suggestions in other classes. Some parents criticised the 'non-traditional' approach, wondered if 'freedom' is not harmful, and worried that the children may not learn English 'properly'. After eight years, most of the children went to different secondary schools and their new teachers perceived their suggestions as irritating or cheeky, and

their behaviour as conceited. It may be fair to say that some of the children grew too critical of their new circumstances.

On the other hand, the children became self-confident and responsible for their own learning. In the first and second groups more than half of the students passed the state intermediate-level proficiency exam by the age of 16. Four students from the first group of 15 graduated from university as English majors, and nine others are using English daily for professional purposes. All learners involved in the project are still studying or using English, and most of them have studied other foreign languages as well.

As a result of the negotiated syllabus, children have acquired a lot of language, have developed a favourable attitude towards English, the teacher and language learning in general. On the whole, negotiation can be successfully applied in the teaching of English as a foreign language to 6 to 14-year-old children if the teacher is willing to take risks.