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## Exploring Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Negotiated Curriculum

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore postgraduate students' perceptions of negotiated curriculum. The statement of problem is whether rigid curriculum is still relevant to postgraduate students' learning. As the postgraduates are adult learners, they are generally working, family, and have other commitments than typical undergraduate students. This in turn suggests for a negotiated curriculum. Boomer (1992:227) defines classrooms in which teachers invite and allow students to help construct the learning journey as "negotiating the curriculum". Comparatively, "curriculum negotiation involves giving students a voice in the choice and development of learning opportunities: both the "what" and the "how" of curriculum" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 171). A total of 30 TESL postgraduate students in UiTM participated in this study. An adapted questionnaire was used to collect the relevant data. Findings revealed that the respondents were aware of the existence of negotiated curriculum. It was also discovered that the main factor for the implementation of negotiated curriculum was hectic schedules of the postgraduate students. The major implication of negotiated curriculum is that it helps postgraduate students in managing their time to study and gives positive effect towards their learning strategies. The findings from this study will benefit students and also instructors at the same time through the implementation of negotiated curriculum in the classroom.

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*Keywords:* Negotiated curriculum; Postgraduate students; Higher education learning

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## 1. Introduction

Boomer (1992:227) defines classrooms in which teachers invite and allow students to help construct the learning journey as “negotiating the curriculum”. The idea of a negotiated curriculum does not imply the abandonment of responsibility for curriculum making by academic staff, nor does it mean giving students, or any other group limitless power to make decisions. Comparatively, “curriculum negotiation involves giving students a voice in the choice and development of learning opportunities: both the “what” and the “how” of curriculum” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 171). Henceforth, negotiated curriculum gives learners opportunity to expose and share their needs, which at the same time assists lecturers in providing what is best for their learners.

Postgraduate students are usually amongst those who work, raise a family, and play other roles in the society. In other words, they have extra commitments besides commitments to their studies. Past researches have documented the challenges of the postgraduates (Wisker, 2011, Faizah et al, 2009).

The main purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of negotiated curriculum among postgraduate students. Therefore, the objectives of the study are to:

- Investigate the implementation of negotiated curriculum in the respondents’ classroom.
- Discover the reasons that lead to the implementation of negotiated curriculum in the respondents’ classroom.
- Identify how negotiated curriculum could assist the respondents’ learning.

This study pursued in answering the following research questions:

- Is negotiated curriculum implemented in the respondents’ classroom?
- Why is negotiated curriculum implemented in the respondents’ classroom?
- How does the implementation of negotiated curriculum assist students in their learning?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Negotiated curriculum and critical thinking in English*

In a more focused scope on English language context, Hodge (2012) proposes an appropriate medium through which to introduce both negotiated curricula and critical thinking skills in English can be translation studies. By comparing and contrasting two English translations of the same original, non-English text, selected by the teacher or unit coordinator, students can apply their own knowledge, as well as skills learned in the course of the unit, to recognize new problems and ideas. These can then be applied to the unit's key outcomes, and their relevance compared to that of texts prearranged by the current curriculum, offering opportunities for debate over the curriculum's structure and content, as well as training students' abilities to assess unfamiliar texts by critical thinking.

### 2.2. *Negotiated ESL learning and collaborative social-learning environment*

Peer review allows student-student conferencing and negotiation of meaning which traditional feedback from teacher would lack. Moreover, the traditional approach detaches learners from interacting with the feedback source, while peer review encourages collaboration and interaction. The social dimension of peer review provides a vital interactive context for the students to swap ideas, negotiate meaning and learn from each other. Aside from improving the writing skills and linguistic competence, peer review was also found to improve the students’ social skills and self-growth. Focusing on the ESL students’ perceptions and processes in the composing effort is likely to assist writing teachers, teacher trainers and researchers in providing more practical and efficient techniques in the learning of second language writing (Abdullah and Abdalla Sallih, 2003).

### 2.3. Malaysian postgraduate students’ perceptions of negotiated learning in international education

Malaysian postgraduate students prefer an international education as they usually claim that negotiating learning demands in international education is essential for grades and for job prospects at graduation. Moreover, Malaysian postgraduates in particular spoke of the need to juggle family commitment and study hence the need of negotiated curriculum, while non-Malaysian postgraduates had other understandings and beliefs. Previous study exhibited that Malaysian postgraduate students commonly seek for motivations and an education particularly international curriculum that can negotiate to their learning and personal needs (Pyvis and Chapman, 2007).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sampling

This study employed cluster random sampling technique in order to collect data. In this study, the participants were TESL postgraduate students. They were Master in TESL students from the Faculty of Education, UiTM Shah Alam. The participants responded to questionnaires distributed. The researchers distributed 15 questionnaires to a group of TESL postgraduate students while another 15 were conducted through Google Docs.

### 3.2. Research Instrument

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of negotiated curriculum among postgraduate students. A set of questionnaire was distributed to 30 TESL postgraduate students. The questionnaire consisted of three sections; section A, B and C. Section A elicited demographic data of the respondents. Section B required the respondents to respond to items regarding their perceptions of the aspects on negotiated curriculum. Section C consisted of open-ended questions on negotiated curriculum.

### 3.3. Procedure for Data Collection

For this study, the data was collected via questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from Summer Institute of Linguistics website, which was entitled ‘Language Learning Attitudes’ and modified according to the context of negotiated curriculum. The participants were given time to complete the questionnaire distributed. Immediately upon the completion, the questionnaire was collected. This indirectly ensured a 100% return rate. The findings were analysed. Data came in the form of percentages and mean scores. Additionally, the open-ended section provided qualitative data, which was analysed thematically in the recommendations.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Analysis of Demographic Data

Table 1.Number of Respondents Based on Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	8	26.7
Female	22	73.3
Total	30	100.0

The respondents comprised 22 female (73.3%) and 8 male (26.7%). Table 1 signifies the details.

Table 2. Number of Respondents Based on Age

Age	Frequency	Percent
21-30	24	80.0
31-40	5	16.7
41-50	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

Based on Table 2, there were 24 (80%) respondents in the range age of 21 to 30 years old. They formed the biggest respondent age group. There were 5 (16.7%) respondents between the ages of 31 to and 1 respondent (3.3%) in the range age of 41 to 50.

Table 3. Number of Respondents Based on Highest Education Level

Education Level	Frequency	Percent
Degree	29	96.7
Masters	1	3.3
Total	30	100

As seen in Table 3, most of the respondents were degree holders, that 29 out of 30 (96.7%) respondents had degree as their highest education level. There was only 1 respondent (3.3%) who already had a master's degree.

Table 4. Number of Respondents Based on Course

Course	Frequency	Percent
M. Ed TESL	30	100.0
Total	30	100

Based on Table 4, the respondents of this study were all from M.Ed. TESL course and most of them were in their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> semester.

## 4.2. Analysis of Results

### 4.2.1. Research Question 1 - Is negotiated curriculum implemented in the postgraduate classrooms?

Table 5. Students' perceptions of the existence of negotiated curriculum in the postgraduate classrooms.

No	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean
1	I personally realize the existence of negotiated curriculum.	7	13	3	4	3	3.5667
2	I am familiar with negotiated curriculum.	2	18	3	4	3	3.5667
3	My lecturers always practice negotiated curriculum in the classroom.	3	16	5	5	-	3.6000
4	My friends always ask for this curriculum to be implemented in the classroom.	2	4	8	12	4	3.4000
5	I am comfortable with negotiated curriculum.	5	15	8	1	1	3.5667
	Overall mean						3.5733

Table 5 signifies the respondents' perceptions on the provision of negotiated curriculum. The overall mean for research question 1 is 3.57, which indicates strong agreements to the items. As shown, negotiated curriculum was practiced in their classes. Based on items 1, 2 and 5 the respondents agreed that they were aware of negotiated curriculum and felt comfortable with it.

### 4.2.2. Research Question 2 - Why is negotiated curriculum implemented in the respondents' classrooms?

Based on Table 6, there were many factors that contribute to the implementation of negotiated curriculum in the respondents' classes. As it is clearly shown in the table, most of the respondents agreed that hectic schedule was the main reason why they would procrastinate (mean = 3.76). Additionally, they agreed that procrastination **was** one of the reasons why negotiated curriculum was an option. This is further strengthened by the fact that many of them agreed that their lecturers need to provide guidelines on how to practice negotiated curriculum in their studies (mean = 4.23).

Table 6. Reasons for the implementation of negotiated curriculum in postgraduate classrooms.

No	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean
6	I think procrastination is one of the factors of implementing negotiated curriculum.	9	8	6	4	3	3.5333
7	Hectic schedule makes me procrastinate in my studies.	5	18	3	3	1	3.7667
8	I feel a resistance from within whenever my lecturers give a due date of submitting assignments	3	13	7	6	1	3.3667
9	To me, it is an indicator of respect to the lecturers if we do not ask for negotiated curriculum to be used in the classroom.	7	9	4	7	3	3.3333
10	In my opinion, the lecturers should have the guidelines on how to use negotiated curriculum in our studies.	13	14	1	1	1	4.2333
<b>Overall mean</b>							<b>3.6467</b>

#### 4.2.3. Research Question 3 - How does the implementation of negotiated curriculum assist students in their learning development?

Table 7. Students' perceptions of how the implementation of negotiated curriculum assist them in their learning

No	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean
11	To me, it is good for the learning process when students study by their own way.	4	17	7	-	2	3.7000
12	Positive outcomes will be achieved when the students are given their own power to control their own learning.	3	14	9	3	1	3.5000
13	More effective teaching-learning process will be achieved through negotiated curriculum.	4	16	8	1	1	3.7000
14	I think the students will develop many positive behaviors through negotiated learning.	2	14	10	4	-	3.4667
15	I end up trembling and practically in a cold sweat when my lecturers do no practice negotiated curriculum in the classroom.	2	8	9	9	2	2.9667
16	I think it is my duty to be responsible when my lecturers hand in the opportunity to have own power to control my learning.	5	22	1	1	1	3.9667
17	In my opinion, we have to understand the reasons of why negotiated curriculum is implemented in the classroom.	12	14	2	1	1	4.1667
18	I think, negotiated curriculum really helps in managing my time.	6	12	10	2	-	3.7333
19	I can at least have some personal time when negotiated curriculum is implemented in the classroom.	4	19	5	2	-	3.8333
20	I think that negotiated curriculum should be used more frequently.	5	12	12	1	-	3.7000
<b>Overall mean</b>							<b>3.6733</b>

Based on Table 7, since the overall mean score is quite high (3.67), it could be concluded that negotiated curriculum could assist the respondents in their learning in many ways. First, the respondents claimed that negotiated curriculum could train them to be responsible (item 16, mean = 3.96). They could also have more personal time (item 19, mean = 3.8) and they could manage their time (item 18, mean = 3.7). Their responses for items 11 and 13 further confirmed that negotiated curriculum could assist them since they claimed that it could encourage more effective teaching-learning process (item 13, mean = 3.7) and that they could learn better on their own (item 11, mean = 3.7).

## 5. Recommendations

Entering the tertiary level gives a whole new dimension of learning as opposed to the secondary and primary levels. Students start to develop the idea of learning as instructors frequently advise and emphasize on the idea of self-directed learners and not depending wholly on their lecturers. In fact, adult-learning situations should be designed to allow adults to retain as much autonomy as possible. Through the findings of this study, there were many positive outcomes of the implementation of negotiated curriculum at the tertiary level that gives benefit to

students and also for lecturers. If we were to recollect on the findings for our third research question which is, ‘How does the implementation of negotiated curriculum assist students in their learning development?’ most of the respondents answered that it helped a lot as it enabled them to take charge of their own learning, managing their time, and it catered to the different learning styles and strategies apparent in the classroom. Hence, this strongly suggests that negotiated curriculum should be implemented in the classroom especially at the tertiary level.

Nevertheless, lecturers should always know how to implement this kind of strategy in the classroom. Findings from the present study also suggested the lecturers to provide guidelines. Harris (2010) outlines several strategies on how to implement negotiated curriculum in the classroom. Some of the strategies are to give learners the freedom in deciding the course content, class schedule, activities, topics, and any other negotiable elements in learning. These elements can be negotiable such as setting up the right date and time in handing in students’ assignments to their lecturers but then again, lecturers must always remember to pose as the authoritative figure in the classroom once in a while in order not to let their students get overboard with their own decisive ideas.

In addition, this finding also entails that students need information on what and how to use negotiated curriculum in their classrooms and not just as the lecturers’ responsibilities. Although most of our respondents encouraged and favoured the use of negotiated curriculum in their learning, some of them disclosed that they did not know how it actually works and how they could discuss matters with their lecturers. Perhaps, this resulted from how they experienced secondary schooling. As Asian classrooms are usually comfortable with their exam-oriented style of learning and that the teachers are always seen as the authoritative figures (Littlewood, 2007), lecturers must assist their students in preparing and expose them to what negotiated curriculum really is. Tertiary level students may want to be assisted in accepting responsibilities and strategies in their own learning to make them ready for student-directed learning. Brenda’s (2008) suggests strategies similar to Harris’ (2010) where students should be exposed to the idea of empowering them with choices and criteria in deciding certain elements like setting up due date for their assignments, topics for assignments, or maybe give them a chance to set up their own class schedule at some point. After implementing all of these suggested strategies, lecturers could conduct and ask reflections from their students on the effectiveness of using negotiated curriculum in the classroom and how it fares in terms of students’ learning process.

## 6. Conclusion

Teachers may overlook the importance of students’ self-directedness in learning, especially in the tertiary level. What the lecturers normally want from their students is their good academic performances in every examination. However, they may not realize that self-directedness influences students a lot in achieving good results. One of the ways in order to produce self-directed learners is by implementing negotiated curriculum in the classroom. In this study, it is perceived that there have been effects of negotiated curriculum on students’ learning process at the tertiary level. The respondents gained various benefits from the implementation of negotiated curriculum including better time management. It is very common that adult learners hold many responsibilities in their lives especially those who are married, have children, and have a career to go to. Hence with negotiated curriculum, adult learners could have more personal time if time management was dealt positively and learn new learning strategies by being aware of the things they hold responsible to. It does not only benefit the students but it will also benefit the lecturers with the satisfaction that students are engaged in their own learning and know what learning is all about.

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