Sharing Decisions with Students: Some Whys, Hows, and How Nots

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In this article Andrew Littlejohn shows some ways in which we can share decisions with the students about how they are working.

Involving Students

Most teachers now recognise that the more students are personally involved in their lessons, the more effectively they are likely to learn. Teachers, therefore usually look for ways in which to motivate students by choosing topics that are likely to appeal to the students, and 'fun' things to do in the classroom such as games, songs, puzzles and so on. In this short article, however, I want to show how we can go further than this and involve the students in making decisions about how their English classes are run.

One of the most important points to make at the outset, however, is that any attempt to involve students in course management needs to be gradual. Most students—and indeed, teachers—have little experience in sharing classroom decisions. This means that unless we do things carefully, disaster can result. I remember, for example, one teacher who told me of an early experience she had. Fired by her reading of experiments with learner involvement, she had begun a new course in a private language school with a group of 13 year old students by asking them "What do you want to do today?". Their reply was one she had not expected: "Go home!". Unsure of exactly what to do, she said after a moment's thought "OK. And, next week, let's talk about if that was a useful thing". Needless to say, she lost her job!

In retrospect, it is not difficult to see what she had done wrong. The students had never been asked this question before, so they gave an immediate, 'gut' reaction—probably assuming that the teacher would not take them seriously. The result was of no benefit to anyone—she lost her job, and the students lost a class. She had simply moved too far, too quickly. The students had no experience of sharing decisions and what this meant, so

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their view was not an 'informed', 'educated' one. The key principle that she had missed was to *start where the students are*. That is, to respect their present views, attitudes and experience and build slowly from that point. This means that we need to find ways to gradually involve students, without risking everything, should it fail. What we need to do is to think about different 'levels' of decisions—different areas in which students can be involved, and a route by which we can gradually expand this.

Level of Decisions: a 'curriculum pyramid'

In any language course, decisions need to be made. These decisions range from the immediate, moment-by-moment decisions in the classroom while students are doing a task, to the wider planning of the syllabus (*what* to teach) and the language curriculum (*what* and *how* the students will learn). We can therefore think about different 'levels' of decisions in a 'curriculum pyramid'. The precise nature of these different levels will vary from course to course, but if we take the familiar situation of a teacher and students using a course-book, with the addition of other activities, then the pyramid might look something like the one in Figure 1.
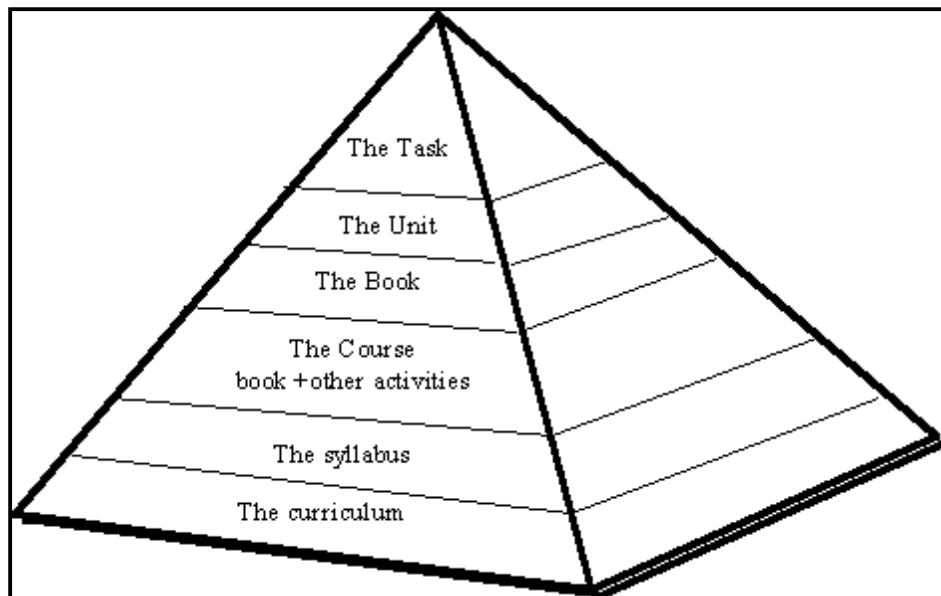

Figure 1 The curriculum pyramid

At the top of the pyramid, we have the moment-by-moment decisions concerning *how* the students are working on a **task.** For example, whether they are working alone, in pairs or in groups, whether they are using an answer key and so on. These are aspects of how precisely the students are working on a task, once the task has been chosen. If the class is using a course-book, however, each task is likely to be part of a **unit** of material and so decisions will need to be made at that level, too. Which tasks will the

students do? Will all the students do the same tasks? Will some tasks be omitted, reordered, or adapted? and so on. Units normally form the contents of a **book**, so at that level more decisions are available. For example, perhaps the order of the units can be changed, or some units can be dropped altogether. Perhaps the tasks and main ideas in the units in the book could be used, but with different content or topics.

Before units are selected, however, a book needs to be chosen (assuming the teacher and students will use a book). In most cases, for example, there may be a number of possible texts that could be used and a decision will need to be made on which text in particular will be adopted. These decisions are made with a particular **course** in mind. Few courses however, only use a book and decisions will also need to be made concerning the choice of extra activities—additional reading texts, games, language practice exercises and so on.

Extra activities may be chosen to provide variety in a course, but they are also often needed to meet the requirements of a **syllabus** which sets out the language areas to be covered, skills to be developed, topics and so on. In some cases, the book chosen may cover all the specifications of the syllabus, but more often that not supplementing is required.

Finally, at the base of the pyramid we have the **curriculum.** This embraces all of the areas above it and refers to general decisions concerning *what* the students will learn (the syllabus), how (types of exercises, projects, discovery tasks, etc.) and how the English classes might relate to other areas in the curriculum –whether, for example, cross-curriculum topics will be chosen, or whether the course will attempt to meet wider educational aims, such as the development of autonomy or cultural understanding.

Control over Levels of the Pyramid

Depending on their individual situation, teachers will normally have control over at least some of the areas in the pyramid. The moment-by-moment levels of 'task' and 'unit', for example, are normally the direct responsibility of the teacher in the classroom, and form the basis of a 'lesson plan'. They may also have some control over choosing the book, or at least choosing 'extra activities' to supplement the book. The deeper one goes into pyramid, however, the more likely it is that specialist organisations will be responsible for making designs at those levels. 'Syllabus' and 'Curriculum' for example are typically areas over which a ministry of education has control.

The first things that a teacher needs to determine, therefore, is down to which level of the pyramid he or she has control or influence. Often, there are more possibilities than we think, if only we use our imagination a bit. Maybe the book has been chosen for us, for example, but perhaps the *way* the book is used has not been determined. Thinking hard about the various options open to us at each level of the pyramid is the first step to finding ways of sharing decisions with the students.

Sharing Decisions

Looking at the curriculum pyramid, it is easy to see why the attempt by teacher I mentioned earlier to share decisions with the students resulted in disaster. What she had done was to offer the students a decision at the level of *curriculum*— responsibility for everything to do with the course. Not only was this an inappropriate thing to do anyway (curriculum decisions having already been made by a central authority—which is why she lost her job!) but the students, having had no previous experience in shared decision-making, were unable to give a responsible answer to the question. The key to sharing decisions with students is to ensure that any decision or opinion that they give will be an *informed* one—based on experience. We therefore need to find ways of building up that experience without risking the structure of the course as a whole.

It is here that the curriculum pyramid can help us. Starting at the top of the pyramid, we can, for example, offer students choices about *how* they would like to do a task: who they will work with, how long for, whether they will use dictionaries, etc. These are all decisions at the level of *task*, that will not risk everything. As students build up experience at one level, we can then move down to the next level, as our circumstances allow. Figure 2 gives some example of the decisions available at each level.

Levels of course design	Example decisions
1 The task	*How shall we do this—in groups? in pairs? alone? How long shall we spend on it? How shall we correct it? Who shall correct it? How much help do you want?*
2 The unit	*What shall we do in this unit? What things shall we omit? Do we adapt the tasks in any way? In what order shall we do the tasks? What shall we do at home?*
3 The book	*In what order shall we do the units? What units shall we omit? Do we need to adapt or supplement the units in any way?*
4 The course	*What other things shall we do, besides use the book? What do you want to revise? How shall we test what you have learnt?*
5 The syllabus	*What things would you like to be able to do? Shall we focus on reading, writing, listening or speaking? What areas of grammar shall we focus on?*
6 The curriculum	*What topics would you like to learn about, besides English? We can use English, for example, to talk/read about science, nature, or geography.*

Figure 2: examples of decisions at each level of the 'curriculum pyramid'

By thinking about things in this way, we can see a route towards gradually involving students in course management. To make sure that students develop the ability to make *educated* choices, however, we also need to make sure that any decision the students make is discussed afterwards. To this, we can have a framework in the back of our minds: *Decision-Action-Review*.

Decision: students involved in making decisions—informed choices ➡ (or the teacher makes a proposal)	**Action:** students do the activity ➡	**Review:** students and teacher evaluate it

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Let's take an example. Suppose, for example, that a teacher is working with students at the level of decisions over *tasks*. She is about to do a listening comprehension exercise with the students but first she offers a *decision:*

> *"Would you like to do this with your books open or closed?"*

In all likelihood, most students say

> *"Open!"*

— the apparently easier option. The teacher then continues (*action*) with the listening task, answering the questions etc. the students with their books

open. Once they have finished, the teacher then asks the students to *review* how they worked:

> *"Was it useful to have the book open? Why? How do you think that helps you to learn?"*

and so on. Sometime later, the students do another listening task and once again she offers the same decision, but this time she makes a proposal:

> *"Would you like to do this with your books open or closed? If you had your book open last time, why don't you try to do it with your book closed this time? See if it is more interesting that way."*

Human nature being what it is, some students at least will respond to the sense of challenge, particularly where there is no risk involved. After doing the listening task, the teacher can then *review* how they worked, comparing the experience of those who had their books open and those who had them closed.

Working in this way, we can see that we can gradually build up the students' experience of being involved in decision-making. If a decision fails at one level, we can simply move back to the previous level. The process of building up this experience is a slow one, but it is a process which can have a considerable impact on how students feel about their lessons, and indeed how they think about learning in general. The key point, however, is that any movement towards involving students in decision-making must be a gradual one, and it will always be the ultimate decision of teachers to decide how far they feel they or their students are able to move from what they are most familiar with.