

English Speaking Skills Through Learner Centred Classroom – An Insight

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Abstract

The willingness of a teacher to share power inside the classroom can be considered as the first step towards Learner-Centeredness. In a language learning classroom, comprehensible input in the target language is the prime resource a teacher can give to the learners. This can improve their listening skills, but unless an opportunity to communicate is being given to the learner in the classroom, the level of his competency cannot be understood and evaluated. As interaction happens in a classroom, language is learnt most effectively, since language learning happens best in interaction. Also, the most valuable learner data can usually be obtained only after proper relationships have been established between teachers and learners. In a language learning classroom, comprehensible input in the target language is the prime resource a teacher can give to the learners. This can improve their listening skills, but unless an opportunity to communicate is being given to the learner in the classroom, the level of his competency cannot be understood and evaluated. As interaction happens in a classroom, language is learnt most effectively, since language learning happens best in interaction. Also, the most valuable learner data can usually be obtained only after proper relationships have been established between teachers and learners. The role of the instructor is being redefined from givers of information to facilitators of student learning.

Keywords: Literature and language teaching, Workshop, pronunciation

Introduction

Based on the impact of the constructivist learning theory, which defined learning as a process in which learners construct organized knowledge (Mayer, 2004). This theory played a significant role in developing the student-centered approaches (Hannafin, Hill, & Land, 1997), which maintain students' accountability rather than the content and teaching process (Cannon & Newble, 2000). Different teaching strategies were developed after the student-centered approach such as students' behavioural activity during learning (Mayer, 2004), e.g. student-activating teaching methods (Struyven et al., 2006), powerful learning environments (DeCorte, 2000), minimal guidance approach (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006), discovery learning (Mayer, 2004),

collaborative/cooperative learning (Slavin, 1995), and project-based learning (Dekeyser & Baert, 1999). Student-centered teaching strategies features are students' independence, instructor's coaching role, and knowledge as a tool, not an aim (Dochy, Segers, Gijbels, & Van den Bossche, 2002). Student-centered approach assists students to develop a "can- do" behaviour, which motivates the students to do their tasks and enjoy their time.

Throughout the learning process in student-centered approach, teachers consider their students' needs and interest as individuals and groups, and inspire them to contribute to the classroom activities. Planning, teaching and assessment procedures are based on students' needs, interests and abilities. Courses topics are outlined to be relevant to the students' needs, interests and lives, which encourage the students to engage collaboratively, understand, and construct knowledge. Student-centered learning alternates the traditional role of the teachers to the facilitation and coaching roles. The teachers are not the only source of knowledge. They assist the students to access and process information to construct knowledge (Attard, 2010). Teachers' do most the work outside the classroom to prepare for their classroom activities and evaluate students' work. Teachers do less work in the classroom because they guide their students to do their tasks by themselves or in collaboration with their classmates under their teachers' supervision (Napoli, 2004). Shifting from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness requires teachers to change their thinking from what they teach to how and why they teach, and about their performance as teachers to thinking about the effectiveness of students' learning processes (Napoli, 2004).

Communication Skills in English

In this age, having solid English skills is a necessity. The desire to speak fluently in English exists in all Indians despite their age or sex. Proficiency in any language is the ability to speak, read, write and understand the language with ease. Developing these four skills through strategies that best suit the learner will most definitely help in moving towards perfection. The general assumption that the more you read, the better you write and the more you listen, the better you speak cannot be ignored. Strategies for accomplishing a task, like acquiring a language are immense and it is the role of the learner to understand and apply the strategy that suits him well. In assessing second language acquisition, competence is the underlying linguistic knowledge that allows people to produce and comprehend their languages and performance is his production of that language or actual utterance made by language users. Language learners' competence in the language can be understood by examining their performance under completely ideal conditions. "The term 'acquisition' is used to refer to picking up a second language through exposure; whereas the term learning is used to refer to the conscious study of a second language" (Ellis, 6). Learning of any language is the acquisition of the skills of that language. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are expression skills. Apart from these four skills, grammatical skills and vocabulary skills can also be called upon. Learners of a language can assess and grade themselves as to which skill they lack and take initiatives to improve their skills.

Language learners should be aware of the fact that language is a social phenomenon. Mere equipping learners with the skills alone can never give them a native like proficiency in a language.

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Learners should be able to use language in accordance with the norms of appropriateness and social acceptability. “if I know the language well and have absorbed some of the common stock of knowledge that every school boy knows who speaks that language, if I know the proverbs and homely sayings and have delighted in the succinct wit of those who speak the language habitually, If I enjoy their jokes. I have sat down beside them and shared some of their consciousness. To learn a new language is to learn a new community” (Smith, 102). If a learner of a second language is able to understand, appreciate and enjoy the subtle jokes in the literary works of the target language, then the learner has gained proficiency over the language. This stage in a language learner where he develops confidence and communicative competence to use the language in appropriate situations, to address topical issues of national and international interest cannot be attained until he gets a platform where peer interaction takes place in the target language.

Conduct of Workshops

One of the biggest advantages of conducting workshops using student–centered approach is the improvement of **communication skills**. It teaches students to be a good presenter. It also teaches him to communicate with others and how to deal with them. When they work in group, they learn many things from their peer experiences. Each student has his own skill set, and a workshop plays a predominant role in the transfer of this skill set. Their **collaboration** is important for the successful of the workshop. The different kinds of activities in the workshop make it fun and enjoyable. It brings students **active participation**. Workshops provided a way to create an intensive educational experience in a short amount of time. It introduced a new concept of using educational games in classrooms, investigated this topic and encouraged the participants to practice actual methods. Conducting the workshops taught them how to work collaboratively with their classmates in the workshop, how to deal with problems which might face during the workshop.

Providing **incentives** for students keeps up students’ motivation to continue working on the workshop even though the challenges that the students had faced during the whole process. Students’ feeling of ownership of the workshop and going through the whole process from planning to implementing the workshop in collaboration with their instructor, keeps up their energy to continue and succeed, which the students’ felt and reflected at the end of the experience. The instructor’ words as “I believe in you” sticks in the students’ minds ,and finally leads them to great success, which all participants stamped on.

The workshop assisted them to be more interested in the information, which they have learned. The topic became clearer through activities. Attracting students’ interests to reach a teachable moment, and making the information easier for the students to understand is an end, which each educator is encouraged to plan for and achieve. Through the workshop process, a **learning community** was built among them through cooperation by assigning the work, in collaboration with their instructor. They respect each other. Cooperation and respects are stones to build learning community. Building this culture is planned by the instructor, which communicated to the students and they start believing in this culture. The students’ actions translated their belief of learning community culture in their communication during the workshop conduction process.

One of the biggest advantages of conducting a workshop is the implementation of **cooperative learning environment**. Cooperative learning experience shortens the time to effectively utilize the students' efforts and conduct the workshop in a mannerly time. Students' distribution of the reading task was a beneficial cooperative strategy to save time and learn the new information and understand. Communication skills especially listening skills are improved during the workshop preparation process. Connecting knowledge with practice facilitates students' comprehension and knowledge acquisition. The students recall the information easily when they need it to apply.

Workshop conduction is grounded from the instructor belief of building learning community among the students to be the initial stone to build the learning. Managing the culture of learning communities take time and is uneasy to explain to some students the meaning of the learning community especially students who believe in individualism and competitiveness. Collaboration among the instructor and students is the secret for the workshops success. Building students 'confidence that they "can do it" was the main goal of conducting the workshop. Giving the students the opportunity to experience creating the educational games and feel relieved. The experience is the key of learning and building self-esteem and confidence of their abilities.

“Only English!”

Sometimes students keep switching from their native language to English and back again. It's hard for them to become more fluent if this happens too often. Students may switch when their English isn't adequate for the ideas they want to express. Sometimes their enjoyment of an activity may make them switch – they really want to say something and its frustrating trying to do it in English.

When lost for words, students may need to ask us for help or use a dictionary, or we may need to interrupt the whole class and offer vocabulary help for everyone. Our own explanations should be in English, even if a quick translation may be easier – we have to observe the “Only English” rule, too!

When we overhear too many students speaking in their native language, we may need to interrupt everyone and help them express the ideas in English. Have students start the activity again from the beginning, but this time ask them to try to stick to English all the time. This may be a difficult challenge, but it's something everyone should aim for.

An effective way of ensuring that an English-only environment is maintained is by making sure that students know the necessary “classroom language” to manage their own group activities in English. This “classroom language” includes simple expressions like:

You start	Do you have a pencil?
What does this mean?	What are we supposed to do?

After you	I'm not quite ready
Let's ask the teacher	I didn't hear what you said
Ok, let's start	Are you ready
We are done. What should we do now	

Using classroom language like this to help students manage themselves within their groups creates an English-only framework for the harder tasks of expressing ideas in English. Students should learn such expressions by heart so that using them becomes second nature. They also need to be able to pronounce them easily and comfortably.

Use only English when talking to students in class. Learning “classroom English” will help students speak in English all the time. If students aren't speaking English when working together, interrupt and ask them to start the conversation again using only English.

Pronunciation Practice

All too often after the beginner level, we neglect pronunciation. This may be because there are more exciting things for students to learn and practice. It may also be because students are unaware of their pronunciation problems when working together, particularly in monolingual classes where all students share the same accent and mispronunciations. Good pronunciation is important for intelligibility. Teacher-led “**Repeat after me**” practice is valuable. Some students may feel that repeating in chorus is childish and beneath them, but it's an effective way of helping them to get their tongues around new phrases and expressions so that they can say them easily and comfortably. A question like **what are we supposed to do?** needs to be mastered as a whole phrase, not as six separate words. It may take several repetitions for students to manage this. Repeating phrases in chorus helps students to copy the rhythm of each phrase and say it aloud again and again without inhibition. Sometimes we can divide the class into two “teams” (left side and right side, for example), with each team saying the phrase as the others listen to them and how they say it, particularly their tone of voice – it's hard to listen when you're speaking yourself. With phrases or expressions such as **That's a good idea!** and **Yes, I agree with you!**, students need practice saying them with enthusiasm or gusto, which is much easier to do when “disguised” by surrounding voices. Then, when working together, students will be ready to use the expressions in real conversations.

Conclusion

In a student-centered classroom, students are involved in the learning process and become committed to improving their English. Different learning styles can be accommodated, and students can help each other to develop their skills. In a student-centered class, students get more “talking time.” In a whole-class activity, the teacher may talk 50 percent of the time, and the students the rest of the time. No, wait! In a class of 50, each student would talk only about 1 percent of the time, and most wouldn't say anything. In groups of four, each student can talk about 25 percent of the time. In pairs, each student can talk about 50 percent of the time. If students want to improve their speaking skills, there's no substitute for pair and group work. Student-centered activities are enjoyable and

stimulating. Hearing different points of view, sharing experiences, brainstorming ideas, explaining things, reacting to other people, and expressing your feelings can be fun. Working together can be exciting – sometimes even moving! In the era of customer centered marketing where the products are being manufactured as per the wish and satisfaction of the customers, Learner centeredness “is, after all, the achievement of greater relevance to learner or customer needs which provides the rationale for flexibilities in the institution and the curriculum”(Satterthwaite, 64). The role of the instructor is being redefined from givers of information to facilitators of student learning. Learner centred teaching is an entirely new way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is about teaching in ways that promote more and better learning.

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