

Is Learner-Centered Approach a Myth?

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Teacher-Centred Learning

In a traditional method of teacher-centred learning, a student was viewed as one who passively received information. The teacher's role was to provide students with the right answer. Thus, the students were expected to be only passive listeners. For instance, to explain English grammar and to compare the language structures, teacher had to give some questions and answers directly without involving students in the learning process. The main focus was getting the learners to practice repeatedly and perform well in examinations rather than enhancing the communicative skills of the students.

Focus of This Paper

This paper examines some important concepts related to 'teaching' and 'learning'. There has been an enormous push to introduce learner-centred teaching methods to students in both elementary and higher level institutions. There is a worldwide assumption that students will be more successful if they have a chance to enjoy while learning. However, the challenge is how to create that environment inside the classroom. It is a drastic change from Grammar-Translation approach to the Communicative Approach because Grammar-Translation approach didn't focus on the involvement of students.

Grammar-Translation Method

Moreover, Grammar-Translation method was not a scientifically developed teaching theory. In this method, teacher became a master of his own class. We had one way

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communication. In one-way communication, the learner listens to or reads the target language but does not respond. The communication is one-way, towards the learner, not from the learner. Examples: Listening to programs, speeches and radio, watching films and most television programs, and reading books and magazines. Here one should remember the words of Benjamin Franklin,

Tell me, and then I forget,
Teach me, and then I remember,
Involve me, and then I learn.

Learner-centred Approach – Is It Feasible in Our Context

In ELT, over the past five decades, many changes have occurred. Learner centred approach has taken over as it brought the learners to be at the centre of the learning process. In this method, teacher helps each student connect to the subject and pays more attention to their activities rather than his own. In involving the learner, the learner-centered teaching expects the learners to be involved even at the planning stage. How feasible will it be in our context is the question to be answered.

Processes

Students have their role in the choice of the texts to be learnt. In reality student-centred learning does not keep the teachers out of the learning/teaching process. It gives equal importance to both the teacher and the learner. Both have their own contributions to the process of learning. Thus, learner-centred teaching is assumed to be a new strategy to recharge our institutional practices. It is the need of the hour to gear up teaching-learning responsibilities to the learners, instead of having them only on the shoulders of teacher. It always includes feedback from the receiver to the sender and lets the sender know the message has been received accurately. Both sender and receiver listen to each other, gather information and are willing to make changes to work together in harmony.

Attention to Examinations

One should remember that the aim of teaching is to impart knowledge among the students. But we have given up objective of teaching by focusing our attention to exams. We are narrowing down the language learning objectives by focusing on the exams. Learning centred is not a myth. The question arises, whether it is a myth because of the way the teaching methodology is used under this. This paper expresses the anguish because the learner-centred teaching has been interpreted to be the learners' exam-success-oriented teaching. This drastic reduction of the objectives of the course has resulted in a mechanical classroom transaction where neither the teacher nor the student contributes.

Kember and Gow's result suggests that,

The methods of teaching adopted, the learning tasks set, the assessment demands made, and the workload specified are strongly influenced by the orientation to teaching. In departments where the knowledge transmission orientation predominates, the curriculum design and teaching methods are more likely to have undesirable influences on the learning approaches of students. (Weimer 69)

Teachers no longer function as content expert or classroom managers. If the goal of teaching is to promote learning, then the role of the teacher is to accomplish that goal. Nowadays teaching/learner-centred approach is reduced to a success story. It doesn't focus on how much students' learn. Learner-centred approach has a new dimension. It has become exam-centered approach, a pathetic condition.

Contribute to the Learning Process

The purpose of either teacher-centred or learner-centred is to make essential contributions to the learning process. They are significantly different from those contributions most teachers currently make. In many educational institutions, they teach a subject to pass the exam. Unfortunately even some colleges reward some teachers for producing 100% results. They have a wrong notion. Learning doesn't end with exams alone. The words of Kember and Gow are significant here:

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Meaningful approaches to learning are discouraged when lecturers believe that their role is restricted to transferring the accumulated knowledge of their discipline to the minds of their students. (Weimer 71)

Life will be discussed in classrooms. Flachhmann says

-that the oracle, the locus and ownership of knowledge, should reside in each student and our principal goal as teachers must be to help our students discover the most important and enduring answers to life's problems within themselves. Only then can they truly possess the knowledge that we are paid to teach them. (Weimer 3)

Krashen and Terrell stress the same point. They argue that the purpose of language instruction is to make learners to understand language outside the classroom. It will lead them to utilize the language in the real world as well as in the classroom for progress. The main purpose of this instruction is to interact effectively with speakers in the target language outside the classroom.

Students' Needs

Teaching should focus on student's needs. The focus on exam success is built on the wrong notion that a creditable pass is the most important 'need' for the student. But in actuality, pass in the exams is a byproduct and the main product is the achievement of language. When we focus on exams the other things to be focused upon get 'out of focus'. Clearly, the teaching should not be exam-centred but learning-centred. Its focus on teaching involves drawing upon students' life experiences, creating opportunities for them to interact and co-operate, and to develop a sense of shared interests and concerns. It makes them 'think' and develops their ability to solve problems. If we handle our students in real sense (learning), we can ensure them with effective learning.

Teachers' Dilemma

Nowadays learner-centred teaching is reduced so as to focus on the success in end-

semester examinations. The teachers are not to be blamed squarely for this situation. Some of the colleges reward staff members for producing 100% result and some others take punitive measures when the results are less than 80%. So the teachers are constantly pressurized to work in terms of examinations. Obviously, this has a negative impact on real learning process. Institutions do not focus on how much students learn in class. Their aim should be focused on learning not on examination based education. Life should also be discussed in classrooms.

To Conclude

The strength of this paper is more in the questions it poses to individual teachers than the answers it provides. In a nutshell, is it really “learner centred” when it is the teacher who decides what students need to take control? Marlin Lewis in “Using student- centered Methods with Teacher-centered ESL Students”, argues that “teacher- centered” is not always the model most appropriate for students, despite its aim.

In essence, this paper is pragmatic in transforming the concept of “learner centredness” from the Western based “learner decision-making” to a method which focuses on the objective of why we teach, i.e., “learning centredness”. The term ‘learning’ gives equal responsibility for both the learner and the teacher for learning to take place within the class room. Classrooms should neither be learner-centred nor teacher-centred, but be learning centered.

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