

The Feasibility of a Learner – Centered Approach to EFL at Syrian Universities

Dr. Ahmad Mleiki *
Ameena Maatouk **

(Accepted 12/1/2002)

□ ABSTRACT □

This article addresses the question of the feasibility of a learner- centered approach to EFL at Syrian Universities . It also investigates the knots that are likely to hinder the application of such a model in a Syrian context .

The solution offered to eliminate such obstacles is seen through “ Learner Training ” programs, which equip the learners with the ability to “ learn how to learn ” and to utilize their self directive efforts in the best way, i.e. to be autonomous learners who manage to have control over their learning process outside the confines of the classroom

* Assistant professor at English Department , Faculty of Arts and Human , Tishreen University , Lattakia , Syria
** Master student at English Department , Faculty of Arts and Human , Tishreen University , Lattakia , Syria

منهجية التركيز على متعلم اللغة الإنكليزية في الجامعات السورية

الدكتور أحمد مليكي*

أمينة معنوق**

(قبل للنشر في 2002/1/12)

□ الملخص □

تتناول هذه المقالة مسألة الملائمة في تطبيق منهجية التركيز على متعلم اللغة الإنكليزية في الجامعات السورية وتبحث في الإشكالات التي قد يواجهها تطبيق منهج كهذا ضمن سياق سوري .

تعرض المقالة حلاً قد يزيل هذه الصعوبات وهو في تطبيق برامج " تدريب المتعلم " الذي يزوده بالقدرة على " التعلم كيف يتعلم " والإستفادة من جهوده الذاتية بالطريقة المثلى ، أي بجعله متعلماً مستقلاً يمكنه السيطرة على العملية التعليمية خارج حدود الصف .

* مدرس في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سوريا .
** طالبة ماجستير في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية - جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية - سوريا .

Introduction

A move towards a learner-centered mode of teaching English as a Foreign Language at Syrian universities has many implications for learners, teachers and the whole educational system within which they are working. A key question arises about the feasibility of adopting such an approach at Syrian universities and for Syrian university learners of EFL. This paper attempts to seek answers to questions such as:

1. Is it feasible to have a learner-centered approach to EFL in a Syrian context?
2. What are the obstacles that may hinder the adoption of such a doctrine?
3. Are there any reasonable solutions to facilitate these difficulties, or is a learner-centered model a mere ideal that remains imprisoned within the “what should be” rather than the “what is”?

Knots

The decision to opt for a learner-centered model of teaching English as a Foreign Language to Syrian university learners is likely to be faced by a series of knots which may have a paralyzing, disempowering and confusing effect upon teachers, learners and the educational system as a whole. The feasibility of a learner-centered system in a Syrian situation faces a number of potential obstacles such as:

- A move towards a learner-centered mode of teaching entails many procedures such as the participation of learners in the educational and decision-making process. This could be done by a process of consultation and negotiation with learners. Many teachers express doubts regarding the feasibility of consultation. This is due to two main reasons. The first predicts a conflicting situation between teachers and learners about their respective roles. This could create a great stress on the part of teachers who are required to adopt a new range of skills if the ideals of a learner-centered approach were to come to reality. The second reason, on the other hand, is the large number of students that makes it almost impossible to take all learners' opinions into consideration. It is difficult, for example, to consult 800 students in the first year of the English Department.
- A teacher with a learner-centered orientation is willing to relate to each student as a unique individual. Again, with such an ever increasing number of students, it is difficult to deal with the increasing diversity of students.
- The conflicting ideas held by teachers and learners. For example, most Syrian university students come to the university thinking that rote learning and memorization are useful strategies in learning English. However, some teachers may not consider such strategies valuable, and may try to discourage their use by learners.
- Observation of Syrian university learners of EFL shows that a considerable number of them rely too heavily on the teacher and adopt a passive detached attitude. The reason for such an attitude can be attributed to their past experience which concentrated on studying grammar and structures and provided few opportunities to use language communicatively. Consequently, they find it difficult to come to terms with more learner-centered and communicative approaches.
- Most of the students have received authority-oriented learning styles, and become accustomed to being sort of “spoon-fed” students, and thereby they learn to receive information passively. Here I find it suitable to state Willing's (1987, cited in Ellis, 1994:507) description of authority-oriented learners because it best fits the qualities of some Syrian students. He describes them to be dependent sorts of people who need teachers' directions and explanations, like a structured learning environment, are intolerant of facts that do not fit, and prefer sequential progression and dislike discovery learning.
- A learner-centered approach enables learners to have a “voice” and “control” over their learning. The crux of the matter, then, is: what if these students do not have a “voice”? What is meant here is that most of the students have never experienced a particular approach. So, they are unable to articulate their needs, preferences and opinions about it.

- A learner-centered orientation in a Syrian context could probably create a sense of skepticism and even fear on the part of the teacher about what will happen to classroom order and discipline if students are given some choice and control over their own learning.
- Learner-centered teaching can represent a challenge to teachers, who may find it difficult to transfer responsibilities for pedagogic decisions to students. This is the case with teachers who are trained to see their role as decision makers.

The Feasibility of a Learner-Centered Approach in a Syrian Situation

It is difficult to have a definite and precise answer to such a statement since this has to be experienced and proved in the long run. Yet, one could predict answers which may sound reasonable.

Here is an attempt to predict whether a learner-centered model is applicable to a Syrian classroom. Below is a checklist which contains characteristics of a learner-centered classroom. I will try to check the statements that could be feasible in a Syrian situation. The checklist is cited in McCombs and Whisler (1997:65-66).

Characteristics of Learner-Centered Classrooms

In learner-centered classrooms, the students

- Choose their own projects
- Work at their own individual pace
- Show excitement about learning new things ü
- Work with students of different ages, cultures, and abilities
- Demonstrate their knowledge in unique ways ü
- Are actively engaged and participating in individual and group learning activities ü
- Go beyond minimal assignments ü

In learner-centered classrooms, the teacher

- Makes it clear that he/she has high expectations for all students ü
- Listens to and respects each student's point of view ü
- Encourages and facilitates students' participation and shared decision-making
- Provides structure without being overly directive ü
- Encourages students to think for themselves ü
- Emphasizes student enjoyment of activities ü
- Helps students refine their strategies for constructing meaning and organizing content ü

In learner-centered classrooms, the instructional strategies and methods

- Use time in variable and flexible ways to match student needs
- Include learning activities that are personally relevant to students ü
- Give students increasing responsibility for the learning process
- Provide questions and tasks that stimulate students' thinking beyond rote memorizing ü
- Help students refine their understanding by using critical thinking skills ü
- Support students in developing and using effective learning strategies ü

- Include peer learning and peer teaching as part of the instruction method ü

In learner-centered classrooms, the curriculum

- Features tasks that stimulate students' varied interests ü
- Organizes content and activities around themes that are meaningful to students ü
- Has explicit built-in opportunities for all students to engage their higher-order thinking and self-regulated learning skills
- Includes activities that help students understand and develop their own perspectives ü
- Allows learning activities that are global, interdisciplinary, and integrated
- Encourages challenging learning activities, even if students have difficulty
- Features activities that encourage students to work collaboratively with other students ü

In learner-centered classrooms, the assessment system

- Assesses different students differently
 - Includes student input in design and revision
 - Monitors progress continually in order to provide feedback on individual growth and progress ü
 - Provides appropriate opportunities for student choice of types of products for demonstrating achievement of educational standards
 - Promotes students' reflection on their growth as learners through opportunities for self-assessment ü
 - Allows diversity of competencies to be demonstrated in a variety of ways
- Cited in McCombs and Whisler (1999 , p.p 65-66)

A close reading of the above checklist shows that most of the issues raised are feasible to be adopted, in a Syrian context, within reason of course .

It seems fortunate that a learner-centered education is flexible in the sense that it does not have to look a certain way or necessarily include all attributes or practices from the checklist to the letter. It is a practice that honors students; it is a practice that appreciates them as human beings; it is a practice that is responsive to their individuality and unique personalities. Tudor (1996:212) brilliantly summarizes his concept of a learner-centered approach.

A genuinely learner-centered approach to teaching will, almost inevitably, vary considerably in response to the specific needs of the learners involved and the characteristics of the teaching context. Learner-centeredness, then, cannot be reduced to a set of techniques. It has far more to do with the willingness to work with learners as they are in a realistic and non-doctrinaire manner. This, however, demands a great deal of flexibility and responsiveness from the teacher.

To sum up, a move towards a learner-centered approach to EFL in a Syrian university context demands a process of reconciliation between learner perceived needs and teacher perceived needs. Some sort of compromise is usually possible if there has been a discussion concerning what both

parties believe and want. Above all learners should be encouraged to reflect upon their learning experiences and articulate those they prefer, and those they feel suit them as learners. However, if the ideals of a learner-centered approach were to come into reality, they should be accompanied by a process of learner training which equips learners with strategies to utilize their self-directive abilities effectively.

Learner Training

A learner-centered orientation demands an active and participatory role on the part of the learners in their language study. However, not all learners may have the initiative to take such a role. As Holec (1979:27) points out:

few adults are capable of assuming responsibility for their learning. .
. for the simple reason that they have never had occasion to use this
ability.

For this reason a learner-centered model for teaching needs an element of awareness development which acquaints learners with the skills of how to learn a language. This is one of the main functions of learner training. Holec (1979) emphasizes that this ability is not inborn but must be acquired by formal learning in a systematic and deliberate way. This is what learner training is about.

Learner training helps learners to understand the quiddity of language learning and to acquire skills and strategies they need in order to be more self-directive learners. What is special about learner training is that it nourishes the processes of consultation and negotiation which lie at the heart of a learner-centered approach. It does this by creating an atmosphere in which teachers and learners can exchange their knowledge and insights. Ellis and Sinclair (1989:2) state that the goals of learner training are:

- . . . to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best so that they may:
- become more effective learners
- take on more responsibility for their own learning

Learning training, therefore, constitutes the starting point for involving learners in their language study and heightens their awareness of the nature of the target language. Tudor (1996:36) lists three main target areas that seem to emerge from learning training instruction:

1. Language learning and language learning process.
2. Language structure and language use.
3. The learners themselves as language users.

The last point, however, relates to learners' psychological and affective involvement in the teaching process, which constitutes an essential part in a learner-centered approach to teaching. Tudor (1996:36) considers that

It is very important that learner training should help learners look at themselves honestly and realistically in their role as language learners, and take stock of their motivation, their attitudes to learning, and their willingness to invest time and effort in language study.

Learner training, therefore, seems to be a preliminary step to prepare Syrian students for a learner – centered model .

Learner Training Strategies for Autonomy

A learner-centered approach aims to make learners aware of their responsibilities as learners and strengthen their autonomy in order to maximize the potential of the classroom. Learner training helps learners to explore their own preferences and shape their approach to suit the requirements of a particular learning task. For this reason, learning strategies—a type of learner training content—should be included in plans to promote learner autonomy. Holec (1981:23) wrote:

Teaching must also help the learner acquire autonomy for himself, i.e. to learn to learn.

It is an urgent demand that any approach towards teaching a foreign language should take into account that helping students to learn how to learn a language is as important as helping them how to use it. “Learning how to learn” involves consciousness about one’s own learning processes and strategies. But this consciousness is subject to disregard by teachers and learners. Wenden (1991) suggests that awareness may be cognitively latent, but it needs to be realized into appropriate action by means of training.

In a twin focus on strategy and autonomy, Wenden (1991) suggests two types of learner training strategies for autonomy: (1) Learning strategies and metacognitive knowledge. The latter deals with providing learners with some basic knowledge about the nature of the language learning process. It refers to learners’ acquired beliefs about these aspects of learning.

The research and theory on self-directive learning in the field of adult education argues that the main reason some learners are more successful than others can be attributed to the fact that successful students learn to adopt active strategies for themselves and have knowledge about their learning. They have the ability to move between these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher and thus they are considered autonomous learners. Rubin (1975) describes the good language learners as having the following characteristics:

- a. Willingness and accuracy as guessers.
- b. A strong drive to communicate.
- c. Often no inhibition.
- d. Preparedness to attend to form.
- e. Practicing.
- f. Monitoring their speech and that of others .
- g. Attending to meaning and context of speech, not only to grammar .

To achieve a sense of autonomy, two factors are needed: learner willingness to take responsibility and confidence in one’s ability as a learner. Brown (1977:352) suggests that

a person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego.

The Confidence Factor

The question of self-confidence has been an important aspect of the “affective filter” in Krashen’s theory (1981) , an aspect which enables the learner to encourage useful input. However, self-confidence may have two contradictory effects. Lack of confidence may result in learners’ inability to exploit what they know. By contrast, there may be occasions where over-confidence may lead to hasty decisions about the specific task at hand.

The Characteristics of Autonomous Learners

One of the main tasks of learner training is to make learners aware of their capacities and to utilize them in acquiring a foreign language.

Ellis and Sinclair (1989:3) tackle a good point when they relate learner training to the concept of learner autonomy in that it provides learners with strategies and confidence to take more responsibility for their own learning. They have raised a good point in considering learner training as a means to “prepare” learners for independence to take charge of their own learning, in spite of the fact that to achieve an absolute autonomy is some sort of an ideal that is hardly found in any life.

Hallgarten (1988:111) states the reasons learner autonomy is seen as a useful and valuable goal:

- Learning is more effective when the learner takes control.
- We all learn what we are ready to learn.
- As adults, learner and tutor are equal and power is shared.
- An autonomous learner can go on learning the subject outside the classroom at the end of the course even if there is a gap of attendance.
- An autonomous learner can transfer learning skills to other subjects.

One of the main advantages of having autonomous learners is that they will be able to select strategies intelligently and use them in a focused and self-directed way.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to seek answers for the following question: Is it feasible to have a learner-centered approach to EFL at Syrian universities? The question is problematic in that it is difficult to make a definite “yes” or “no” answer. It is more complex than that since adopting such a doctrine is likely to be faced with a series of obstacles which may have a paralyzing effect upon teachers and learners. I have stated some of these “knots”. In order to eliminate them, I have suggested a process of learner training which develops a sense of learners’ autonomy in order to take the responsibility for their own learning outside the confines of the classroom. It is worth bearing in mind that a learner-centered model of learning is flexible and does not have to look a certain way or necessarily include all the attributes of a learner-centered thinking. Thus a move towards a learner-centered approach to EFL in a Syrian context demands a process of reconciliation between learner-perceived needs and teacher-perceived needs. In sum, a learner-centered model—with its combined focus on learning and learners—provides a promising area for increasing the likelihood of positive students’ experience, resulting in increased motivation, learning and achievement. But it has to be gradually applied to its appropriate components lest a negative result should emerge.

References:

.....

- Brown , R. 1977 . “ Introduction ” in C. Snow and C.Ferguson (eds.) . 1977. Talking to Children . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press
- Ellis , G. and B., Sinclair . 1989 . Learning to Learn English : A Course in Learner Training . Teacher’s Book . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press .
- Hallgarten , K. 1988 . “ Students autonomy – learner training and self –directed learning ” in S., Nichollas and E. H. Maidment (eds.). 1988 . Current Issues in Teaching English as a Second Language to Adults .Edinburgh .Nelson .
- Holec , H. 1979 . Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning . Strasbourg : Council of Europe .
- Holec , H. 1981. Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning .Oxford . Pergamon .
- Krashen , S. 1981 The “ fundamental pedagogical principle ” in second language teaching . Studia Linguistica 32 (1-2) : 50 – 70 .
- McCombs , B. L. and J. S. Whisler . 1997 . The Learner – Centered Classroom and School: Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation and Achievement , California. The Jossey – Bass Education Series .
- Rubin , J. 1975 . What the “ good Language learner ” can teach us . TESOL Quarterly 9 : 41 – 51 .
- Tudor . I. 1996 . Learner – Centerdness as Language Education . Cambridge : Cambridge University Perss .
- Wenden , A. 1991 . Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy : Planning and Implementating Learner Training for Language Learners .New York and London . Prentice Hall .
- Willing , K. 1987 . Learning Styles and Adult Migrant Education . Adelaide : National Curriculum Resource Centre.