

TOWARDS A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to discuss the importance of embracing a learner-centred approach when teaching English to students at non-philological faculties. The paper will start from clarifying some theoretical aspects: What does “learner-centred” mean? Why is it important and why is it important especially for non-philological faculties? Then the paper moves on to examine some of the practical issues, emphasizing the importance of creating, adapting and tailoring teaching techniques and materials so as to help students develop those language skills needed in a business environment, i.e. in their future careers. In addition, the paper will deal with some of the problems that might occur when adopting a learner-centred attitude and will suggest some ideas that may enable teachers to become more learner-centred. The paper will mainly draw on (but not be limited to) Maryellen Weimer’s (2002) description of five practice areas to work on in order to achieve learner-centred teaching: the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility for learning, the processes and purposes of evaluation and the balance of power.

Keywords: learner-centred, content, evaluation, power, role, autonomy

1. Introduction

In our country, teaching has been traditionally based on a stale, passive lecture format, mainly focusing on the teacher who is forever trying to instil knowledge into the minds of passive students. In other words, teachers tend to focus more on what they do rather than on what the students are learning. This emphasis on what teachers do often leads to students who are passive learners and who do not take responsibility for their own learning. This traditional approach is usually called “teacher-centred” approach. The curriculum and materials used are usually not adapted so as to meet the specific needs of the learners and this is especially the case of most non-philological faculties where there is still a grammar-based curriculum rather than one designed in order to teach English for Specific Purposes. However, over the past decades, there has been a gradual shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach. This approach to teaching English has been increasingly being encouraged in higher education over the past decades in developed European countries while in Romania is still in its early stages. In Romania, the first steps towards a learner-centred curriculum were made in the 1990s with the PROSPER Project. (Bardi et al., 1999). The acronym of the project stands for “Project for Special Purpose English in Romania” (Bardi in Tribble, 2012: 179) and as its name suggests, the project was meant to reform the teaching of English for Specific Purposes in 16 universities in Romania in order to improve the level of English proficiency of future professionals in the most important Romanian industries: engineering, economics, public administration and medicine. The project turned out to be a real success: on the one hand, teachers have left aside most traditional methods, have become more flexible, have taken on new roles meant to promote the students’ learning process and on the other hand “materials have become real-life oriented, including authentic texts, as well as tasks

which mirror the students' current and future professional activities and they are also learner-centred, exploiting the learner's background knowledge and encouraging them to co-operate with one another and to get involved in their learning" (<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/54/3/305.extract>). But in spite of the success of the project, not much has been done in order to support and develop further on learner-centred teaching in non-philological faculties. Therefore in the following lines the paper will discuss the importance of adopting a learner-centred approach to teaching English and how this might be achieved by outlining the areas that teachers need to work on.

2. Learner-centred teaching (LCT)

As Susan Sheerin states in a British Council webinar (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/webinars/learner-centred-classroom>), LCT is an approach not a methodology, i.e. not a step by step guide but rather a way of teaching based on a set of principles and attitudes, which have aspects in common with other teaching approaches: learner autonomy, self-access learning, learner training, task-based learning. Due to its innovative principles, LCT creates new roles for both the teachers and the students, thus changing the relationship between them.

Maryellen Weimer's *Learner-Centred Teaching* (2002) is one of the most modern and comprehensive studies in the field and identifies five practice areas to work on in order to achieve learner-centred teaching: the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility for learning, the processes and purposes of evaluation and the balance of power. In what follows the present paper will discuss in turn the changes to be made in each practice area and will try to shed light on the way in which the roles of the teachers and the students change in LCT.

2.1. The Balance of Power

Weimer opens the chapter by addressing an almost rhetorical question: would we characterize our students as "empowered, confident, self-motivated learners?" (Weimer, 2002: 23). Unfortunately, more often than not, the teachers' answers would come as disappointing as follows: learners are usually passive, hesitant and unmotivated. They will not speak in class if not called on and more importantly, as Weimer also points out in the same paragraph, they "like, want, indeed need, teachers who tell them exactly what to do. Education is something done unto them. It frequently involves stress, anxiety, and other forms of discomfort". Hence the question arises "Is there something about the way we teach that discourages students' development as learners?" (Weimer, 2002: 23). While pondering upon what we as teachers might do wrong in class, Weimer presents us with a set of questions to reflect on:

"Who decides what (content) students learn in the course? Who controls the pace (calendar) at which content is covered? Who determines the structures (assignments, tests) through which the material will be mastered? Who sets the conditions for learning (things like attendance policies and assignment deadlines)? Who evaluates (grades) the quantity and quality of the learning that has occurred? In the classroom itself, who controls and regulates the flow of communication, deciding who gets the opportunity to speak, when, and for how long?" (Weimer, 2002: 23-24).

While answering the questions above, it results that most of the important decisions about learning for students are made by teachers alone so this may obviously be an underlying cause for the students' lack of motivation and indecisiveness. Consequently this calls for a reallocation of power in the classroom. Both Weimer (2002) and Wilson (2005) suggest that whenever possible students should be allowed to make decisions about their learning process. As Weimer points out, learner centred-teaching involves sharing power with students i.e. giving students some controlled power over those learning processes that directly affect them, not just transferring power wholesale (2002: 28). In other words learner-centred teachers should look for *responsible* ways to share power with students. Concerning the teaching components in which students should be encouraged to be more actively involved, Weimer suggests that teachers should allow students to make controlled decisions about course activities, assignments, course policies and even evaluation activities (2002: 32-40) while Wilson suggests that teachers should allow students to have some control over class materials (2005).

2.2. The Role of the Teacher

The reallocation of power discussed above brings about a change in the role of the teacher. The new role of the teacher focuses on ways to facilitate the learning process: "learner-centred teachers connect students and resources. They design activities and assignments that engage learners. They facilitate learning in individual and collective contexts." (Weimer, 2002:76). The teacher is no longer seen as *the* figure of authority but he/she becomes more like a partner in learning who is willing and able to step aside and let the students to take the lead. (Weimer, 2002: 72). The teacher is therefore no longer the only source of knowledge but students are encouraged to learn from several sources of knowledge. In other words, the teacher has a facilitative role rather than a purely didactic one. He/she encourages students' independence and the students' involvement in making decisions about their own learning

On a more metaphorical level the role of learner-centred teachers has often been compared to that of a guide (Mayer, 2008), (Black, 1993), (Lewis, 1992), a coach (Dunn, 1992) (Frei, 2007), a resource (Black, 1993), or even to that of a negotiator (Voller, 1997).

However, many people have questioned the feasibility of empowering students to take control and make their own decisions about their learning. When it comes to the degree of power that students may be able to handle, Weimer warns us that "the amount of decision making it takes to motivate students must be weighed against their intellectual maturity and ability to operate in conditions that give more freedom at the same time they also require more responsibility. Most students arrive in classrooms having made almost no decisions about learning" (2002: 41). Weimer suggests that in order to keep a balance of power, teachers could provide the students with a range of options from which they can choose. For example, concerning course content, we could offer them a list of possible topics from which they could pick those that they are most interested in. We could also let them decide the content of the review session and finally, concerning assessment, we could provide them with a list of possible assignments from which they could select those that most appeal to them (Weimer, 2002). All these suggestions may responsibly give students more control over the aspects that most affect their learning and consequently may also help increase students' level of motivation.

2.3. The Function of Content

As Weimer rightly points out (2002: 46), one of the paramount factors that influence teaching is the obsessive focus on covering content. Moreover she draws attention to the negative consequences of the teachers' traditional assumption that "more is better" and calls for a rethinking of the role of the content advocating a need to focus on the development of learning skills and learner self-awareness: "A good teacher does not teach all that he knows. He teaches all that the learner needs to know at the time, and all that the learners can accountably learn in the time given" (Vella, 2000: 11 in Weimer, 2002: 71).

Accordingly, just as Sue Sheerin points out in the webinar, the curriculum and classes should be planned taking students' needs into account and the learning objectives should be stated in terms of what the students will be able to do with the language, not what content will be covered. The focus should thus be on language skills, i.e. what the students will be able to do with the language in real-life situations, e.g. at their workplace.

This is especially true for students in non-philological faculties where more often than not, teachers still focus on grammar, which proves rather ineffective as a consequence of the fact that when students are being put in a workplace situation they cannot communicate efficiently because they lack the specific job terminology and even more, they realise they have forgotten most grammar rules they had studied in university.

Therefore, in order to meet the very needs of their students and thus of future professionals, teachers should create, adapt and tailor the teaching methodology to the very faculty they teach at so as to help students develop those language skills needed in a business environment, i.e. in their future careers. For this, they should try and design teaching materials that enhance students to do purposeful tasks based on the real life while using appropriately the English language, e.g. conducting a conversation at the workplace using confidently the vocabulary specific to the specialty; holding a meeting, roleplaying a business phone call, an interview etc.

But in order to be able to offer meaningful practice opportunities teachers should be first open and willing to instruct themselves in an area of English they may not be comfortable with even in their mother tongue (e.g. engineering, medicine, economics, law etc.). Secondly, because of the very limited number of available materials they should be able to adapt textbooks, hand-outs etc. to the class/specialty so as to provide a language-rich environment for the learning process. Moreover, teachers should involve students more in collaborative and cooperative learning (Weimer, 2002): e.g. pair work, group work, role-play. In addition, teachers should make use as much as possible of the learners' own life experiences by asking real questions, not questions to which they already know the answers.

2.4. The Responsibility for Learning

As we all know us and Weimer also points out "many students lack confidence in themselves as learners and do not make responsible learning decisions" (Weimer, 2002: 95), which greatly affects the learning process. Thus teachers should encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning inside and outside the classroom by becoming less passive and more actively involved in their learning because "if

students have to make decisions about the words and grammar they are studying- that is if their encounter with the language has some 'cognitive depth'- they are far more likely to understand and remember that language than if they meet the new language passively" (Harmer, 2009: 57).

But while some students would welcome such an approach from the very beginning, others may be insecure, reluctant or even hostile to such a proposal. This may come as a consequence of various factors: on the one hand because of the fact that our educational system creates very dependent learners and thus they are not used to take responsibility for their learning and on the other hand because they simply do not have a sense of awareness of themselves as learners which subsequently makes them feel unsure of themselves when having to take control over the learning process.

Consequently, in order to get students to accept responsibility for learning, teachers should start from building appropriate class climates that enhance student responsibility and autonomy. In order to achieve this, teachers should first try to involve students as much as possible in the process of setting the conditions for learning (Weimer, 2002). For example, teachers and students should work together in order to agree on a list of appropriate class policies and practices. But in order to make amends for the limits of class time and to increase the chances for successful language learning, students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies outside the English classes as well so that they may become autonomous learners (Harmer, 2009: 394).

2.5. Processes and Purpose of Evaluation

The last area mentioned by Weimer (2002: 119) that we need to work on in order to achieve learner-centred teaching is evaluation. Nowadays there is a focus more on grades than on learning because it is assumed that learning occurs somehow automatically out of the evaluation process. Moreover, as Weimer also notes, students seem to find evaluation extremely stressful causing them feelings of anxiety and fear, which prevents them from focusing on meeting learning objectives.

Weimer's new role of evaluation does not break altogether with its traditional role, i.e. giving grades, but it offers an enlarged one, so that in learner-centered teaching evaluation is still an important teaching aspect but it is meant not only to generate grades but most importantly to *promote learning*: "This new purpose of evaluation assigns a new role to students: they should learn how to assess their own performance and actively participate in the assessment of their peers' performance" (Weimer 2002: 119). There are several ways of achieving this, e.g. we could organise a debate on a controversial topic and split the students into three groups: one group will be assigned to be in favour of the controversial issue, the other group will be against it and the third group should only sit aside and assess their peers' performance. This easy-to-do activity may raise students' awareness about their strengths and weaknesses and about how the whole learning process takes place.

Also important in the LCT evaluation is formative feedback (Weimer, 2002). Moreover, in order to reach its goal, feedback should be constructive, i.e. it should "be directed toward the performance, not the person, should use language that describes more than it evaluates, and should not overload the receiver. Its effectiveness is enhanced if it is immediate and well-timed" (Weimer, 2002: 130).

Thus, as Weimer (2002: 145) also concludes, in LCT the purpose of evaluation is better balanced so that the assessment processes are used not only to give grades but to facilitate the learning process as well. Evaluation activities should be used to develop self- and peer assessment skills in order to develop a sense of awareness of the learning process in students.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, the learner-centred approach to teaching English is more effective than the teacher-centred approach for a number of reasons: firstly because what is taught is not necessarily learnt so teachers need to be able stir students' interest for learning. This can only be achieved if the focus is on the students' needs not on the teachers constraints. Secondly, LCT is more feasible because language learning involves skill development, not only knowledge transmission so teachers should focus on ways to develop students' ability to use language effectively in real-life contexts rather than their ability to simply "reproduce" it. Finally LCT is more effective because it aims at developing students' awareness of themselves as learners and it consequently enables them to figure out what their best learning strategies are.

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