

A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS AN L2

*Arsenio Sánchez Calvo
Universidad de Valladolid*

Though there are different ways of teaching English as a second language, they can be divided into two broad categories: the teacher-centred way and the learner-centred one. For centuries, the former has been the norm in L2 classrooms, but things seem to have gradually changed in the last two or three decades. This paper tries to trace the development of learner-centred teaching since its birth in the 1980s, and to examine how it has been used and how teachers and researchers have reacted to its implementation in second language formal or academic teaching. It also aims at pointing out the main roots and ideas of this approach to second language teaching as well as the consequences it may have both on teachers and learners in terms of behaviour and skills needed.

INTRODUCTION

Things changed dramatically in second language teaching when Noam Chomsky (1959) argued that language acquisition could not take place through habit formation but through some innate capacity that humans possess. From that moment on, learners have been seen as active agents involved in the learning process rather than as passive imitators of controlled language input, and L2 learning has been seen as a natural cognitive process in which learners are ultimately responsible for their own learning.

This active role of the learner has also brought a lot of changes into the teaching of English as a second language. This is what Rebecca Oxford (1990:VII) said seventeen years ago, “In recent years there has been a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner -from exclusive focus on the improvement of teaching to an

increased concern for how learners go about their learning task in a second or foreign language”.

Though in 1977 Peter Strevens (1977:5) had said that learner-centred educational outlook was “sweeping through much of the world,” by and large we can say that until the 1980s, the main focus of L2 teaching was on *method*, and nobody ever questioned the role of the teacher as the centre of L2 teaching and subsequent learning. But in the last two decades of the 20th century people became increasingly interested in involving the learner in the teaching-learning process and this gave rise to the term *learner-centred teaching*.

In 1980, Alan McLean (1980:16) published a seminal article with a very defying title: “Destroying the Teacher: the Need for Learner-Centred Teaching”. And, seven years later, D. Larsen-Freeman (1987:8) wrote: “The general pattern in modern-day methodology is for the teaching to be learner-centred. By this, I mean that it is the teacher who serves as a guide in the learning process, but it is the learners who assume some responsibility for the direction of the learning and who bear ultimate responsibility for how much learning takes place”.

Eleven years ago, Corony Edwards claimed that language teaching was moving towards a learner-centred methodology (Willis & Willis 1996:99). This trend was confirmed two years later by Alan Waters’ words (1998:11): “In recent years, the importance of adopting a learner-centred approach to ELT classroom management has become axiomatic”. And five years ago, J. Taylor (2002:10) painted the following picture: “The traditional perceptions of teacher as expert, instigator, administrator, and the student as passive recipient, are being remodelled, and sometimes violently shaken, to make way to other behaviours”.

This new kind of teaching, which tries to see the L2 teaching-learning process from the point of view of the learner and to pay special attention to the needs, aims at the characteristics of learners, and it seems to be still gaining ground in second language teaching. It seems as if it wants to put into practice the principle that “teaching should be subordinated to learning,” which was precisely one of the basic tenets of the *Silent Way* back in 1972 (Larsen-Freeman 1986:51).

In the next few pages, we would like to have a close look at how it all started, what its main roots and characteristics may have been, and what are the consequences or changes the implementation of learner-centred teaching may have on teachers and learners of English as a second language.

SOURCES OR ROOTS OF LEARNER-CENTRED TEACHING

It is difficult to discuss about anything without reference to its history. Therefore, it seems to be very convenient to have a quick look at the origins of learner-centred teaching.

According to David Nunan (1990:179), general learner-centred philosophy “emerged as an offspring of communicative language learning”. The shift from the structural to the communicative approach implied in some way a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching. In 1985 R. B. Kaplan (1985:3) wrote: “various approaches have fostered the notion of student-centred classroom”. And obviously, Kaplan was referring precisely to the Total Physical Response Method, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, the Silent Way, the various communicative approaches and the Natural Approach in particular, all of which are mainly based on the notion of how learning takes place and try to facilitate learners' learning process. In the end, the aim of all of them is the learners' communicative competence and the focus is always on the learner rather than on the teacher.

Another undeniable root of learner-centred teaching seems to be the humanistic approach to teaching, which, based mainly on the work of Maslow and Rogers, emphasises the importance of the learners' affective factors -motivation, enjoyment, etc- in the L2 learning process. Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology seems to have had a direct influence on the learner-centred approach. According to A. Underhill (1989:251), Rogers “proposed a shift of focus in education from teaching to learning, and from teacher to facilitator. He saw teachers as facilitators of learning not just ‘from the neck up’, but of learning that involves the whole person”. As everybody knows, Community Language Learning is directly dependent on Charles A. Curran and Rogers' views, and it is crystal clear that this approach and learner-centred teaching have a lot of things in common.

Some other relevant sources may be cognitive psychology on human processes and learning strategies as well as research in sociology and general education with its tradition of self-fulfillment, growth, co-operation and meaningful activity.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OR ASPECTS OF THIS APPROACH TO TEACHING

“The starting point for all language teaching should be an understanding of how people learn,” as Hutchinson and Waters (1990:39) write. And therefore, it is only natural that if we -as teachers- want our students to learn an L2 -English in our case- efficiently, we should pay attention to how they learn it. It may seem a truism but we must remember that learning an L2 is something that the learner, and only the learner, can do.

Learner-centred teaching seems especially suited to teaching a second language, an activity or process that has to do more with learning how to do things than with knowing about things. The learner-centred approach “tends to view language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of language,” in Nunan's words (1990:21), and it is associated with some specific techniques or classroom activities, such as working in pairs or groups, though what makes the real difference is that teachers, who follow this approach, try to engage learners in meaningful activities whose main aim is genuine communication in the target language.

Learner-centred teaching tends to promote inductive learning, and, consequently, learners are not taught grammatical or other types of rules directly, but are left to discover or induce rules from their experience of using the second language. Many methodologists currently claim that the teacher's job is precisely “to create conditions in the classroom that will enable students to learn by becoming engaged in activities or working in tasks,” as G. S. Murdoch (1990:15) puts it.

For Penny Ur (2001:6), there are two versions of this approach, the *strong* one, which “would imply things like getting learners to find out information for themselves rather than being told, to create their own materials, to decide on their own syllabuses, to self-asses” and the *weak* one, which “would imply things like asking for and respecting (but not necessarily obeying) learners' requests, a lessening of the teacher-talk and an increase in learner activation”.

The attitudes of both teachers and learners are two vital and very important things in the L2 learner-centred teaching. As K. Jennings and Tom Doyle point out, “the learners' learning styles and objective and subjective needs must be central to each teacher's planning processes” (Willis & Willis 1996:175), if the teacher wants to maximise the potential of the learning situation.

Along with this new emphasis on the learner instead of the teacher there are some facts or ideas that are specifically learner-centred, such as:

1. The authenticity of language content and materials in the classrooms. According to David Nunan (1990:105), a key aim of a learner-centre curriculum is to use authentic materials in order “to generate classroom activities which simulate genuine communication in the classroom in the hope that this will facilitate transfer of learning” from classroom to outside -or real world- second language use. And David Nunan (1990:99) insists on the fact that this authenticity “should relate to the text sources as to student activities and tasks”.
2. Language content's appropriateness to the learners' needs and interests. Though it is true that, as Alan Maley writes, in many of the classrooms with which most of us are familiar “it is normal and expected that teachers will make most, if not all, of the decisions about the teaching content and materials” (Campbell *et al.* 1992:3), we now know that students learn best when they become engaged in activities or tasks in which they have to use the target language, so learners' communicative needs are a priority in the learner-centred approach. As Alan McLean (1980:18) puts it, there is “a clear need for the content of language-teaching materials to involve the learner -to relate to his needs, interests and moral concerns”. According to K. Jennings and Tom Doyle, in a learner-centred approach, learners' needs (classified in terms of real-life tasks and learning style preferences) form the centre of the teacher's planning process” (Willis & Willis 1996:175).
3. Learners' active role in the learning process. The learner becomes the active agent in the learning process and he or she takes charge of the learning while the teacher becomes a mere facilitator of that learning. As A. McLean (1980:17) points out, “Learning is most effective when the learner is the initiator of the learning process”. Classes are dynamic and learner-centred teachers try to involve learners in the organisation and development of different activities, and learners are frequently invited to experiment with the L2 by using it in writing and talking as much as possible. Recent research into the nature of learning has put special emphasis precisely on the active role learners must play in the learning process.
4. Learners' autonomy. One of the main features of this approach is that learners' autonomy is promoted, and learners are made responsible for their own learning. According to J. Taylor (2002:8), “A certain degree of autonomy is always worth encouraging because it raises motivation and speeds up progress”. But H. Holec and Alan Waters, among many others, go much further. H. Holec (1995:265) is in favour of teaching language learners to learn, because, as he puts it, that “is considered the best way of

ensuring that learning takes place”. It seems to be crystal clear that at the end of the day, the ultimate responsibility must always lie within the learners themselves, because, as we all know from our own experience and Rebecca Oxford (1990:11) points out: “When students take more responsibility, more learning occurs, and both teachers and learners feel more successful”.

TEACHERS’ SPECIFIC SKILLS

As we have seen above, there has been a clear shift in the world of teaching and learning, and I absolutely agree with J. Harmer when he says: “Good teachers care more about their students' learning than they do about their own teaching” (1998:3), but what can or should teachers do? As David Nunan (1991:235) points out, “learner-centredness does not imply that teachers should abandon the classroom to the learners”. Diane Larsen-Freeman was absolutely right when she said that teachers “just can’t go into the classroom and let students run the show. You (the teacher) have to come in with some kind of activities, but activities that will remove the focus from you” (Ancker 2001:3). According to the learner-centred approach, the teacher's function may become less dominant than before, but not less important.

The new approach seems to be much more demanding than the teacher-centred one, and this has obvious implications for teachers and their classroom roles. As Altan and Trombly (2001:29) remind us, “students may become out of control in a student-centred classroom, and conflicts about learning may arise between teachers and learners,” especially if students believe the teacher's methodology is not appropriate. And, as many of us know, it is not always easy to accept a change in classroom organization. Consequently, teachers need to be trained in some new *skills* such as:

1. Needs-analysis skills to establish the content or syllabus to be covered and the method to be adopted in the classrooms. As David Nunan (1990:151) puts it, “in a learner-centred educational system, it is the teacher, who is the principal agent of curriculum development”. Needs-analysis can be carried out in the form of a discussion, a checklist or a questionnaire.
2. Course-planning skills, such as flexibility in the way of approaching language learning and adaptability to the learners' needs and context. Knowing how to adapt to the context in which the target language is taught and learned is a must for teachers according to this approach. As everybody knows, all teachers can and should do is provide good

conditions within which learning may take place, and therefore the better these conditions are the more successful the learning process will be.

3. Educational skills, like empathy and intuition, to try to overcome the possible problems and difficulties as well as to move from explicit to implicit instruction and from controlled to free target language production. In this approach, the teacher is seen as a facilitator -to use Carl Rogers's term- of the learning process more than as anything else. As Adrian Underhill (1989:251) claims, "The job of the facilitator is not to decide what the students should learn, but to identify and create the crucial ingredients of the psychological climate that helps to free learners to learn and to grow".

CONCLUSION

According to what we have seen above, the learner-centred approach to teaching is gaining ground in second language methodology, and more and more teachers are beginning to subordinate teaching to learning. There is no doubt that the learner-centred approach provides a practical and viable alternative to the traditional teacher-centred approach to activate learners, and to help them induce - or find out for themselves- the grammar rules. Instead of explaining rules in advance, learner-centred teachers try to do their best to help their students learn the second language by themselves as much as possible. Learner-centred teachers pay special attention to learners' needs when they are preparing the syllabus, the materials or the texts they are going to use in the classroom, because they are sure all that effort is going to pay handsome dividends according to the latest research on second language acquisition.

The learner-centred approach to teaching a second language offers a stimulating, effective and rewarding -though time-consuming- alternative to those teachers who are willing to try something different and promising instead of going over the same old familiar ground.

REFERENCES

- Altan, M. Z. and C. Trombly. "Creating a learner-centred teacher education program". *E. T. Forum* 39:3 (2001): 28-34.
- Ancker, W. "The Joy of Watching Others Learn: An Interview with Diane Larsen-Freeman". *E. T. Forum*. 39.4 (2001): 2-9.
- Campbell, C. *et al. Learner based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Cross, J. "On reflection". *English Teaching professional* 25 (2002): 39-41.
- Harmer, J. *How to Teach English*. Harlow: Longman, 1997.
- Holec, H. *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1995.
- Hutchinson, T. & A. Waters. *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Kaplan, R.B. "Applied Linguistics, The State of the Art: Is there One?" *E. T Forum*. 23:2 (1985): 2-6.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. *Techniques and Principles in Language Learning Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. "From Unity to Diversity: Twenty Years of Language-Teaching Methodology". *E. T. Forum*. 25:4 (1987): 2-9.
- Lewis, Marilyn. *How to Study Foreign Languages*. London: McMillan, 1999.
- Lewis, M. *The Lexical Approach*. Hove: L.T. Publications, 1993.
- Lewis, M. and J. Hill. *Practical Techniques for Language Teaching*. Hove: L. T. Publications, 1985.
- Murdoch, G. S. "Practising What We Preach -A Trainee -Centred Approach to In-Service Training". *E. T. Forum* 28:4 (1990): 15-18.
- Nunan, D. *Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- McLean, A. C. "Destroying the Teacher: the Need for a Learner-centred Teaching". *E. T. Forum*. 28:3 (1980): 16-19.
- Nunan, D. *Language Teaching Methodology*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Oxford, R. *Language Learning Strategies*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1990.
- Priotto, F. "A way with words." *English Teaching professional* 25 (2002): 48-50.
- Scrivener, J. *Learning Teaching*. London: Heinemann, 1994.
- Stevens, P. *New Orientations in the Teaching of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Taylor, J. "The road to autonomy". *English Teaching professional*. (2002): 8-10.
- Underhill, A. "Process in humanistic education". *ELT Journal*. 43:4 (1989): 250-56.
- Ur, P. "Check it out". *English Teaching professional*. 21 (2001): 5-8.
- Watters, A. "Managing monkeys in the ELT classroom". *ELT Journal*. 52: 1 (1998): 11-18.
- Willis, J. & D. Willis eds. *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1996.