

ASPECTS OF A FOCUS ON THE LEARNER IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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In a traditional language teaching context, the teacher is the means and the student is the end of the teaching-learning process. However, in a learner-focused context, the learner is the means and end of the process. The teacher's traditional dictatorship gives way to the learner's natural rate and route of learning. The learner dictates the objectives of instruction, the syllabus, the method of instruction and techniques of correction. This focus on the learner is today known as learner-centred instruction.

As Ellis and Sinclair (1989) point out, the field of language teaching and learning has been influenced by the ideas of those who call for "respect for the individual in society". This respect is reflected in the acknowledgement of the individual's ability to be responsible for his or her own affairs. In language teaching and learning, such respect entails learner autonomy; his role in decision making. In other words, the learner should be allowed to choose what he wants to learn how and when he should be taught, and the way in which he wants to learn, (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Gomes de Matos, 1986). Thus, learner-centred teaching includes choices in objectives of learning, rate of learning, method or style of learning, and content of learning.

Teacher-centred approaches, including all teaching-learning aspects where learners are not involved, are believed to have little or no effect when they are in conflict with the learners' goals and strategies of learning. With regard to syllabus design, the attempts to make the content of learning consistent with the learners' needs resulted in the 'process or negotiated syllabus', (Breen and Candlin, 1980). Nunan (1988), for example, points out that the class time available may be nowhere near enough to teach everything that the learners need to know; a person cannot learn all the aspects of a language. Therefore, the selection of the content of the syllabus can be based on the aspects of language which the learners believe urgently required.

Language courses designed for specific purposes include the functions and structures of language that are of immediate relevance to the learners, but the learners have no role in the selection, grading and method of teaching these functions and structures. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) prefer to use the term *learning-centred* instead of *learner-centred* on the grounds that "the learner is only one factor in the learning process"; there are other factors such as the class time available and the specific purpose of learning as perceived by the teacher or the materials designer. They rightly point out that there is no a truly learner-centred approach" since most learning takes place within institutionalized systems" where the ingredients of the teaching-learning process are pre-determined. Accepting the term 'learning-centred' to include the learner and any other factors affecting the teaching-learning process, the term 'learner-centred' may refer to the focus on the learner: his learning strategies and their contribution to the teaching method.

The concept of learner-centredness is associated with the notional-functional syllabus whose principles are drawn from the learner's role in society. The learners' needs are analyzed in terms

of what they need to do with the language; the functions they need to perform and the notions they need to express in different communicative situations. The focus on the social contexts of language use is believed to be a change from the structural syllabus which is based on language forms. Thus the functional syllabus is believed to be 'learner-based' whereas the structural syllabus is 'subject-based'. However, the structural syllabus can also be learner-centred when it is viewed from the perspective of creativity in language learning. People learn languages by generalizing or systematizing from the data to which they are exposed. Given a finite number of rules they can generate an infinite number of forms and structures. Thus, if the functional-notional syllabus is learner-centred because it attempts to be sensitive to the learner's communicative needs, the structural syllabus can be learner-centred because it attempts to be sensitive to the learning process.

In relation to classroom activities, learner-centredness entails rejection of the traditional teaching-learning situations where the teacher is an authority and does most of the work in the classroom; situations in which the teacher is "the great leader, imparter of knowledge, and ... the centre of all activity" (McGreal, 1989). Instead, the learner-centred approach emphasises the learners' active participation with the teacher being a guide, consultant and orchestrator.

The concept of learner-centredness seems to be important in teacher training, too. Das (1984) points out that most of the training programmes are "still geared to the idea of teacher-control" with the result that teachers regard themselves as 'virtuosos'. A learner-centred approach to training would have the trainee experience the methods he is told to use. The trainee should be able to see his techniques through the learners' eye by putting himself in their place as a potential learner, (Breen and Candlin, 1980). In other words, the teachers can be trained in a way that enables them to bring their teaching techniques as close as possible to the students' learning styles and strategies. This may be done by asking the teachers to put themselves in the learners' shoes and to introspect about the learning strategies they used when they learned the target language.

As far as the teaching methods and approaches are concerned, there is a sense in which most of the innovative approaches (e.g. Comprehension-based Instruction, Community Language Learning, The Natural Approach, The Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia) can be considered learner-centred: they aim at exposing the learner to the language data so that he can pick what he wants according to his own needs and interest. Language learning could be a conscious mental process, a process of hypotheses formation based on previous linguistic knowledge, particularly the native language as indicated by translation errors. A learner-centred grammar teaching technique would be based on the interlinguistic transfer strategy employed by the learners, (Mahmoud, 1995). In other words, through their errors, the learners determine their problem areas and through their learning strategies as indicated by errors, they can determine how these problem areas can be taught. The teaching technique could be in conformity with the learning process as far as it makes use of the learners' natural tendency to make contrastive comparisons between the native and the foreign language. The traditional techniques of teaching grammar seem to interfere with the learners' strategies by focusing on verbalization of rules, naming of categories, and provision of elaborate and abstract analysis, which are external to the natural process of learning. The use of metalinguistics in grammar instruction does not only constitute an additional learning burden, but it has nothing to do with the way people actually process language (Garrett, 1986). The fact that pedagogical grammar differs from the learner's grammar has an important implication to grammar instruction. Grammar rules and explanations can be presented in such a way as to approximate the learner's hypothesis formation process as

far as possible, (Mahmoud, 1996). In this way, grammar will be taught the way it is learned since the basic source of information for such an informal pedagogical grammar is the learner himself and not the grammarian who does not write explanations for learning purposes.

A common practice in foreign language teaching is the detection and correction of mistakes and errors in the hope of enhancing the learning process. As James (1996:354) puts it, “learning is most successful when it involves only a limited amount of stress, when students are relaxed and confident and enjoying their learning”. Such an environment could be created, among other things, by adopting a less threatening technique of correction. The teacher should not dominate the correction process and deprive the students of the opportunity to correct themselves. In this respect, using correction symbols – i.e. “coded corrective feedback” (Mahmoud, 2000) – can help in self-correction, thus making the environment more hospitable and face-saving. The use of symbols also respects individual differences among the students since one student’s slip is another student’s error. Students should be given the chance to deal with their deviations according to their own needs, interests and learning stages. Such an opportunity for self-correction acknowledges the students’ ability to shoulder the responsibility of their own learning. As in the other aspects of learner-centred teaching, the role of the teacher will be seen as one of guiding students rather than spoon-feeding them. The students’ own contribution to the learning process through self-correction entails a change from the traditional teacher-centred situation where the teacher is seen as an authority, a source of knowledge who does most of the work in the classroom.

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