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FROM TEACHER-CENTERED TO LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: The transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction represents a significant shift in educational philosophy and classroom practice. This article examines the theoretical foundations, instructional strategies, benefits, and implementation challenges of learner-centered education, with particular attention to English language teaching. Drawing on established scholarship in constructivism, active learning, formative assessment, and learner autonomy, the paper proposes a practical framework for creating participatory, inclusive, and reflective classrooms. It argues that learner-centered education does not eliminate the teacher's role; rather, it redefines the teacher as a designer of learning experiences, facilitator of interaction, and provider of timely feedback. The article is a conceptual literature-based discussion and does not report original experimental findings.

Keywords: learner-centered education; teacher-centered instruction; English language teaching; active learning; autonomy; formative assessment; collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher commonly determines the content, pace, interaction patterns, and criteria for success. Explanations and demonstrations may be efficient ways to introduce unfamiliar concepts, but prolonged reliance on lecture and recall can limit opportunities for learners to practice decision-making, communication, and self-assessment. In contrast, learner-centered approaches position students as active participants who construct understanding through purposeful tasks, dialogue, feedback, and reflection.

The distinction should not be reduced to a simple opposition between lecturing and group work. Effective instruction can include explicit teaching when needed, while still giving learners meaningful opportunities to apply knowledge and take responsibility for progress. The central question is how instructional decisions respond to learners' needs and promote demonstrable learning.

2. Theoretical foundations

Constructivist perspectives emphasize that learners interpret new information in relation to prior knowledge and experience. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further highlights the role of interaction and guided support in learning. From this perspective, pair and group activities are not merely changes in seating arrangements: they become productive when learners negotiate meaning, receive scaffolding, and work toward clear outcomes.

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Weimer (2002) describes learner-centered teaching as a redistribution of responsibility for learning, accompanied by changes in the role of content, teacher authority, assessment, and classroom power. Likewise, the principles summarized by the American Psychological Association (1997) emphasize cognitive, motivational, developmental, and individual-difference factors that influence learning. These perspectives support flexible teaching rather than a single universal technique.

3. Comparing classroom models

Teacher-centered instruction generally prioritizes teacher explanation, predetermined answers, and assessment of reproduced knowledge. Learner-centered instruction emphasizes guided inquiry, authentic problems, collaboration, and evidence of understanding. However, both models can contribute to effective learning: clear explanations establish foundations, whereas structured practice and feedback help learners transfer and deepen those foundations.

A productive classroom therefore combines explicit objectives with opportunities for student choice. For example, after a brief introduction to persuasive language, English learners may analyze model texts, select a topic relevant to their experience, draft an argument with a partner, and revise it using a shared rubric. The teacher remains responsible for quality, access, and progress throughout the process.

4. Strategies for English language classrooms

Task-based activities create a communicative reason to use English. Learners might plan a school event, solve a travel problem, compare job advertisements, or conduct a short interview. Tasks should specify an outcome, provide necessary language support, and include a reflection stage in which students notice useful vocabulary, grammar, and interaction strategies.

Collaborative learning can increase speaking opportunities, particularly in classes where a small number of confident students otherwise dominate. Think–pair–share, information-gap exercises, peer review, and jigsaw reading assign each student a clear contribution. Teachers can strengthen accountability by rotating roles, requiring individual reflections, and checking the quality of group products.

Differentiation helps address varied proficiency levels. Teachers may offer texts at different levels of complexity, sentence starters for emerging speakers, extension questions for advanced learners, and alternative ways to demonstrate understanding. Student choice should be bounded by learning objectives so that flexibility does not undermine curricular coherence.

Formative assessment is integral to learner-centered practice. Short exit tickets, observation notes, feedback conferences, self-assessment checklists, and drafts with revision cycles reveal what students understand while there is still time to adjust instruction. Feedback is most useful when it identifies a specific next step rather than only assigning a score.

5. A practical implementation framework

First, identify measurable learning outcomes, such as summarizing a text, supporting an opinion with evidence, or sustaining a short conversation. Second, assess prior knowledge through a quick

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diagnostic prompt. Third, introduce essential content with concise explanation and modeling. Fourth, organize an authentic task requiring student participation. Fifth, collect evidence of learning through observation, peer discussion, and individual work. Finally, close with reflection and plan the next lesson based on the evidence collected.

For a 45-minute English lesson on expressing opinions, a possible sequence is: five minutes for a diagnostic question; eight minutes for teacher modeling; twelve minutes for pair discussion using prompts; ten minutes for small-group problem solving; five minutes for short presentations; and five minutes for an exit ticket. These times are illustrative and should be adjusted for age, proficiency, and class size.

6. Challenges and conditions for success

Learner-centered teaching may be difficult in large classes, examination-oriented systems, or settings with limited resources. Students accustomed to direct instruction may initially interpret greater responsibility as a lack of guidance. Unequal participation, off-task discussion, and differences in language proficiency can also reduce the effectiveness of group activities.

These challenges require deliberate classroom management. Teachers should explain why a task matters, model expected behaviors, use clear time limits, assign roles where appropriate, and assess individual as well as group learning. Professional development and peer observation can help teachers refine task design and feedback practices. Importantly, learner autonomy develops gradually; it should be supported rather than assumed.

7. Discussion

Research on active learning suggests that well-designed participation can improve learning outcomes, although findings from one discipline or educational setting should not be generalized without caution (Freeman et al., 2014). In language education, communicative approaches similarly emphasize meaningful use of language, but their success depends on instructional quality, student readiness, and contextual constraints.

The strongest interpretation of learner-centered education is therefore not “less teaching,” but more responsive teaching. Teachers retain expertise and authority for creating safe, purposeful learning environments while students gain opportunities to practice, question, collaborate, monitor progress, and exercise informed choice.

8. Conclusion

The shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered classrooms involves changing both classroom activities and underlying assumptions about how learning occurs. For English teachers, carefully scaffolded communicative tasks, collaborative routines, differentiated support, and formative assessment can make learning more active and meaningful. Successful implementation requires clear objectives, structured guidance, and attention to local conditions. Rather than replacing the teacher, learner-centered education strengthens the teacher’s role as an intentional facilitator of student growth.

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