

IMPLEMENTING LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH: A SURVEY ON ITS FEASIBILITY

Lubaba Sanjana
Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities,
BRAC University
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract:

Student-centered or learner-centered approach is widely used in language teaching and learning pedagogy (O'Neill and McMahon 29). In this approach, the focus is mainly on students who share responsibilities for activities and tasks. However, Balan et al. argues that learner-centeredness is ensured with the "active participation" of a facilitator (652). This paper reviews ways through which a teacher can ensure learner-centeredness in his/her class. Besides, why a teacher should think of adopting this particular approach is also highlighted. This paper further sheds light on the possible advantages learner-centered approach can have. How the pitfalls of this approach have an effect on implementing learner-centered approach—is also one of the focuses of this paper. Finally, as per the review of literature indicates, the researcher also gives certain recommendations that can guide through the future studies, especially those working on English language teaching in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: learner-centered approach, technology, advantages, disadvantages, feasibility.

Implementing Learner-Centered Approach: A Survey on Its Feasibility

In a language learning class, it is expected that learners will interact through several activities which will facilitate their learning process. This phenomenon can be ensured by implementing learner-centered approach. Learner-centered approach can be learners' choice in education and their role in the process of language teaching and learning (O'Neill and McMahon 30). This particular paradigm takes learners at the centre of the learning process (Thamraksa 60). Nonetheless, teachers only help learners to solve difficulties that the learners face while doing any activities (Pedersen and Liu 58).

The purpose of this paper is to present a survey on the feasibility of implementing learner-centered approach in a language classroom. This paper focuses on the facts that are identified in the existing literature. The role that teachers and learners play in learner-centered environment is discussed elaborately in this paper. This paper attempts to clarify the pros and cons of implementing such approach. Finally, it concludes with the researcher's recommendation regarding the implementation of learner-centered approach, based on the existing studies.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Essential Concepts of Learner-Centered Approach. It should not be thought that in learner-centered approach, a teacher does not give lecture in class (Froyd and Simpson 5). It is to be noted that in such approach learners, instructors and the learning process—all play significant roles and are considered important factors (Wichadee 45).

O'Neill and McMahon mention that learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches are not two completely separate approaches having contrasted aspects (28). They believe that the situation is "less black and white" in case of regular practice (29). These two approaches are rather two terms of a continuum. Table 1 can illustrate this particular concept.

Table 1
Learner-centered and Teacher-centered Continuum

Learner-centered learning	Teacher-centered learning
High level of learner choice	Low level of learner choice
Learner active	Learner passive
Power primary with the learner	Power primary with teacher

Table 1 The continuum of two learning approaches (adapted from O’Neill and McMahon 2005: 29)

From this table, it can be seen that a teacher could be in any point of this continuum. S/he also can travel from one point to another depending on contextual needs. Besides, the position of the teacher will depend on the teacher’s beliefs and perceptions. According to this continuum, if a teacher moves towards left, s/he will eventually move towards a more learner-centered practice. Why Implementing Learner-Centered Approach. In a traditional classroom, a teacher-centered approach is practiced, as opposed to a learner-centered approach. Teacher-centered approach cannot produce learners as “active recipients”, for which language learning becomes “fossilized” (Wichadee 44). For this reason, teachers can think of creating an environment that can help learners to actively participate in the language learning process.

Moreover, teaching becomes enjoyable in learner-centered environment as teachers who adopt learner-centered approach, find teaching more enjoyable than in a teacher-centered pedagogy (Froyd and Simpson 3). One of the reasons can be that in learner-centered approach “boredome and stereotyped repetition” do not occur and therefore are excluded (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 163). This particular aspect makes this approach enjoyable and different from traditional teaching paradigm.

Besides, study shows that in a learner-centered environment learners themselves identify critical factors and vital aspects of learning which lead to their success (Balan et al. 639). Learners’ active role helps them distinguish what features are important for their language development. Moreover, learner-centered approach acknowledges the power of learners’ schemata. This approach builds on schemata since it identifies the fact that the learners’ prior knowledge can significantly influence their future learning process (Froyd and Simpson 1).

Apart from these, learner-centered approach also goes against one of the traditional teaching beliefs. Many traditional teaching approaches consider a teacher a “righteous guru” who is in the ultimate possession of all knowledge (Thamraksa 62). These teaching approaches completely deny the creativity of prospective learners. On the contrary, learner-centered environment involves learners in the learning process. Thamraksa mentioned that through learner-centered approach, learners become less dependent on teachers; they recognize knowledge and therefore, value learning (67). Learners also understand that they themselves have to be responsible for their own learning. Considering these aspects, a teacher can implement learner-centered approach in his/her class. Following are the ways to implement learner-centered approach in language classrooms.

How to Implement Learner-Centered Approach. There can be several ways which can promote learner-centeredness in a class. One example could be the addition of the latest technology along with the existing classroom tools. Casey offers a framework where learner-centeredness can be ensured by combining “online social and participatory media” along with “face-to-face teaching” (159). In order to implement learner-centered approach, the roles that teachers and learners need to play will be discussed in the following section.

Role of the teachers

In a learner-centered classroom, students will involve in pair or group activities, where the teacher will not participate as the central role (Garrett and Shortall 26). Rather, the teacher will play the role of a facilitator where s/he reflects on his/her teaching (Haley 170). A teacher will only present problems or issues but will not provide any solutions since the “nature of response” will be decided by the learners (Pedersen and Liu 58).

The facilitator also needs to possess particular “personal attitudes” in order to ensure learner-centeredness (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 162). It should be the teacher who will make efforts in creating a positive classroom environment. S/he must also consider learners’ various needs including social, emotional and academic (Daniels and Perry 103). Besides, teachers will also raise deeper questions regarding learners’ learning process and how learners will be able to facilitate their learning by adjusting to such approach etc. (Froyd and Simpson 7).

In this respect, teachers’ “interpersonal values” come into play as being a facilitator, a teacher should be supportive by creating an environment of “trust and openness” where s/he can acknowledge every individual (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 163). In a learner-centered classroom, a teacher also needs to realize that listening to the learners’ voice is essential for effective teaching (Garrett and Shortall 48). A teacher further can integrate *multiple intelligences* or MI into the classroom pedagogy in order to make it more learner-centered (Haley 171).

As mentioned earlier, in case of learner-centered approach, teachers will help students finding possible resources through helpful questions (Pedersen and Liu 58). Similarly, the teachers should direct learners in such a way where they will first comprehend and then go beyond their understanding (Hannafin et al. 767). It can be understandable that learner-centered approach discourages teachers to provide direct correction to learners.

In terms of covering content of a course, studies show that different responses can be found from teachers. By adopting learner-centered approach, some teachers are able to complete most content; some teacher complete less content. However, the extent to which teachers will be able to cover the content depends on an “individual teachers” (Froyd and Simpson 3, 4).

It is to be mentioned that one of the features of learner-centered teaching is that it allows a teacher to understand how his/her teaching is being received by the learners (Garrett and Shortall 45). Based on the learners’ feedback and their interest, if needed, the teacher can reconsider planning and implementing the course, or designing and selecting activities. In this manner, a teacher plays the role of a facilitator in a learner-centered environment.

Role of the learners

Learner-centered approach differs in many ways from traditional approaches of English language teaching as it considers “students’ evaluations of their language learning experience” an integral part (Garrett and Shortall 27). This particular aspect was not present in other early approaches. Here, learners are not merely given the chance to articulate their reactions; rather are allowed to evaluate in a “reflective, reflexive, reasonably systematic and comprehensive way” (Garrett and Shortall 48).

This approach also allows students to share responsibility since every member is held responsible for the consequence of group or team work (Balan et al. 650). Besides, this approach can be particularly helpful for learners since a student can seek for individualized help from teacher, as needed, in a learner-centered environment (Daniels and Perry 102). In this respect, one of the studies suggests learners to have a certain amount of sincerity in order to cope with the changes. The learners themselves will select and elaborate problems in classes. In this case, teachers’ implicit predesigned structure is needed so that learners do not get misled due to excessive liberty (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 164).

Apart from these, along with the appropriate use of learner-centered methods, Smith emphasizes on learners’ having the ability to properly measure their own learning. The advantage of this

method will be visible if these two conditions are fulfilled—correctly applied methods and learners’ ability to measure (Smith 2).

In order to measure which particular linguistic items can be learned effectively through learner-centered approach, a study has been conducted by Dobinson. He points out that through classroom interaction vocabulary learning can be strengthened. Students can certainly learn from teachers but a simple exposure of language can help students’ learning. Nonetheless, in this case, learners’ involvement might not be a prerequisite since the learning process can be “idiosyncratic” in nature (Dobinson 207).

Additionally, learners’ effective role can be certified if they are prepared beforehand. To illustrate, in order to ensure the effectiveness of implementing learner-centered approach, learners should be given some prior direction. A “domain-independent guidance” and an “advance training” might become helpful in promoting “self-regulation skills” (Hannafin et al. 775). This initiative will help learners to actively engage in a learner-centered pedagogy.

The Current Condition of Implementing Learner-Centered Approach. Since there lie several differences in teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches, it is obvious that some changes will be required to implement learner-centered approach. The implementation may not be established only by the course or program designers; teachers have a major role to play. Pedersen and Liu suggest that most teachers need to “make substantial changes” in order to practice such approach (59). They believe that the educational beliefs of teachers will determine whether or not teachers will implement a “technology-enhanced” learner-centered approach in class (Pedersen and Liu 60).

Thus, in order to promote learner-centered approach a teacher might not need to completely renovate his/her adopted curricula. Teachers can include “thematic and interdisciplinary units” as well as varied activities designed around learners’ Multiple Intelligences or MI (Haley 166). By incorporating MI in classroom practices, a teacher can make his/her classroom environment more student-friendly and learner-centered.

Using internet and technology to implement learner-centered approach

It has been a common practice to use a range of social spaces, for example, “blogs, groups, and discussion forums” for language teaching (Casey 184). It can be said that incorporating technology might indicate learner-centeredness in a classroom, as researchers believe that technologies complement learner-centered approach (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 170). They think that after consulting with facilitators, learners can explore learning materials freely through technologies. They also propose two ways—as a “knowledge source” and as an “eLearning platform”—of using the Internet (164). Besides, “audio, dynamic visual formats, computers and the Internet” can be the tools that can develop learners’ learning as well as empower them (Thamraksa 62).

Furthermore, in order to build a learner-centered environment, teachers can think of using social networking sites as learning platforms. Learners can get the opportunity to create groups and forums where they can “share and build knowledge” according to their interests (Casey 184). It will allow them to obtain personalized feedback from both fellow learners and teachers through online discussion platforms (Casey 160). Now the researcher will present some of the advantages of learner-centered approach.

Advantages of Implementing Learner-Centered Approach. According to a study, teachers who plan and organize instructions centering on learners’ needs and preferences might effectively discover learners’ latent potential (Haley 172). This could be one of the vital advantages of this approach. However, study shows that the advantage of students’ involvement might depend on some contextual features, for example, cultural background, educational settings etc. (Dobinson 208).

Besides, learner-centered approach often offers authentic or realistic experiences that can help learners' learning through interaction. In this case, scaffolding can be an effective technique that can facilitate the processes of learners' learning and understanding (Hannafin et al. 776). Consequently, learning becomes more collaborative in nature since it is "self-directed" and "problem-based" in a learner-centered class (Wichadee 44).

Learner-centered approach is completely unique as this particular paradigm not only focuses on learners but also aims at facilitators' development in terms of his/her personal, social and cognitive growth. Thus, teachers can interact with learners and, can acknowledge and admire learners' creativity in a learner-centered environment (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 163, 170). Learner-centered approach also promotes learner-autonomy where students are given the opportunity to assess the benefits and weaknesses of their involvement in various activities (Garrett and Shortall 27). Through learners' active involvement, this approach allows learners to make their own decisions to improve their language learning process.

Additionally, a study shows that in a learner-centered class all learners can find the opportunities from in-class activities that "closely match" their own learning objectives (Smith 3). Nonetheless, some researchers argue that a possible resistance may come due to changes in teaching and learning process (Froyd and Simpson). They suggest that teachers discuss the advantages of learner-centeredness, i.e. providing students opportunities to present ideas as input to which teachers will respond (6). Similarly, Smith believes that learners will start to appreciate the learner-centered instructions once they get to see the reflection of their goals in teaching methods (4). Therefore, these studies indicate that for effective teaching, it would be a better idea to explicitly introduce learners to the positive aspects of learner-centered approach in advance.

Apart from these, the benefits of learner-centered environment can be assisted by providing "pre-learning arrangements" to learners (Balan et al. 650). Through these kinds of arrangements, learners themselves can take prior preparation, be informed with assigned work and actively engage in class discussion. For this reason, this approach can have significant impact on learners' "academic performances, attitudes toward learning, and persistence in programs" (Froyd and Simpson 3).

Disadvantages of Implementing Learner-Centered Approach. Just like every approach comes along with some pitfalls, learner-centeredness is not flawless. Some researchers argue that a teacher should not try to separate a learner-centered and a teacher-centered approach. Instead, for a facilitator, it would be sensible to acknowledge learners' perceptions and manage the learning processes accordingly (Balan et al. 652).

Some researchers show their hesitation in promoting this approach since it does not seem to be realistic (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 169). One of the reasons can be that, in some cases, teachers' active role is considered more successful than students' involvement. A study also shows that teachers' active teaching through repetition can help students retaining their learning effectively (Dobinson 191).

One of the features of learner-centered approach is that a teacher will present varied instructional tailor-made activities that are designed based on learners' lives and fit to their developmental level (Daniels and Perry 102). This can be one of the disadvantages since it will be extremely time consuming for language teachers.

It is also to be mentioned that many teachers possess supreme and indisputable faith in their own "professional judgment", where they consider learners' comments to be "inherently misguided" (Garrett and Shortall 48). Therefore, it would be completely impossible to ensure learner-centeredness in classes with teachers having such beliefs. On the other hand, if learners do not have any prior knowledge, skills or experiences to involve effectively in students activities, like group work, team work etc., it would certainly become difficult for implementing learner-centered approach (Froyd and Simpson 1).

Again, implementing learner-centered environment through online social spaces is complex and problematic (Casey 165). One of the drawbacks of using the World Wide Web for implementing learner-centered approach is the abundance of resources. From the ample resources available in the Internet, learners need to evaluate and select particular source according to their needs (Motsching-Pitrik and Holzinger 164). This might become overwhelming for the young learners. Nevertheless, researchers advocate for specially designed self-checking procedures which can guide learners while they web navigate (Hannafin et al. 778).

Measuring the Feasibility of Learner-Centered Approach. After highlighting some of the advantages and disadvantages of learner-centered approach, the researcher would like to measure its feasibility. First of all, the strongest argument against such approach might be the fact that learners, having experiences with more teacher-centered approaches, may reject it on the very outset of practice. However, this approach could be feasible prior to the fact that it is well-designed based on learners' need. In this case, however, to what extent learners are aware of their needs must be taken into consideration. Besides, it does not seem to be rational to believe that learners should be given the opportunity to determine several aspects of curriculum design where teachers only act according to learners' shown direction (Auerbach 154).

Moreover, some researchers have questioned the authenticity of the claims of learner-centered approach. Garrett and Shortall pose question regarding the fact that whether student activities will increase learning along with increased student-interaction or not. They believe that the success of learner-centered activities will largely depend upon learners' beliefs and preferences (Garrett and Shortall 28). If learner-centered approach can provide effective learning for students, it might be considered a helpful teaching paradigm.

Apart from these, one of the studies also shows that "all classrooms are 'teacher-centered'" and learner-centeredness is a "false construct" (Auerbach 145). No matter what amount of involvement learners are allowed to have; it is the teacher who "shapes how the learning community develops" (Auerbach 145). Auerbach strongly opines that only teachers will guide the learning process since they have the power to exercise. In addition, it is to be noted that teachers are even given the authority to completely deny taking the findings of learners' needs analysis into consideration (Brown). It can be understood that whether one agree or disagree; a teacher will have the prime authority and s/he will be the assigned person in a classroom who is allowed to apply his/her power accordingly. Therefore, learner-centeredness cannot be established without the supreme involvement of teachers, where the learners will participate according to teachers' guided path.

Conclusion:

Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all relevant elements related to learner-centered approach; it mainly focuses on the studies that address the implementation of such approach. Learner-centered approach claims some potential outcomes which did not seem evident in actual classroom practices, to some extent. Besides, some English language teachers strongly believe that learner-centered approach can be helpful, but in fact they do not adopt such approach. Therefore, much of the existing studies demonstrate the discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their classroom application.

Recommendation. This paper neither advocates for nor denies the value of implementing learner-centered approach. The researcher has tried to present how several studies over time have shown the feasibility of implementing learner-centered pedagogy. This paper finds that even though there can be some advantages of promoting learner-centeredness in classroom pedagogy; there might lie some problems. The manner in which this approach dictates and the way it is manifested in classrooms, vary significantly. It is true that for the presence of the World Wide Web, the

Internet offers uncountable resources which address variety of needs. Nevertheless, it might become harder for a learner to identify and manage the appropriate resource which will be beneficial for his/her learning (Hannafin et al. 777). In this case, technology can even play an adverse role in promoting learner-centered approach. Therefore, the incorporation of technology and the Internet might not be a clear solution for the potential problems.

The problems that come along with learner-centered approach will remain unaddressed if teachers themselves do not adapt and customize such approach. They need to balance between learner-centered approach and direct-instruction/teacher-centered approach. Based on the particular pedagogical context, a teacher can prefer to have an eclectic view, where s/he can choose any of the approaches that suit the best in a given context.

References:

- Auerbach, Elsa R. (2000). "Creating Participatory Learning Communities: Paradoxes And Possibilities." In J. K. Hall, and W. G. Eggington (Eds.), *The Sociopolitics of English Language Teaching*. Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters LTD, 2000, books.google.com.bd/books?hl=en&id=5igPq3qWZN0C&oi=fnd&pg=PR6&ndd=The+sociopolitics+of+English+language+teaching&ots=eelEZ30Wm3&sig=bexG9tX0pzsVns4kctv3MrBo_Ig&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Creating%20participatory%20learning%20communities%3A%20Paradoxes%20and%20%20possibilities&df=false
- Balan, Peter, et al. "Preparing students for Flipped or Team-Based Learning methods." *Education + Training*, vol. 57 no. 6, 2015, DOI:[.org/10.1108/ET-07-2014-0088](https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-07-2014-0088). Accessed 18 May. 2018.
- Brown, James D. "Needs Assessment." *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development*. NY, Heinle and Heinle, 1995.
- Casey, Gail. "Building a Student-Centered Learning Framework Using Social Software in the Middle Years Classroom: An Action Research Study." *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, vol. 12, 2013, 159-189. www.jite.org/documents/Vol12/JITEv12ResearchP159-189Casey1186.pdf. Accessed 22 June 2018.
- Daniels, Denise. H. and Kathryn E. Perry. "Learner-Centered" According to Children." *Theory into Practice*, vol. 42 no. 2, 2003, pp. 102-108. DOI:[10.1207/s15430421tip4202_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4202_3)
- Dobinson, Toni. "Do Learners Learn from Classroom Interaction and Does the Teacher Have a Role to Play?" *Language Teaching Research*, vol. 5 no. 3, 2001, pp. 189-211. DOI:[10.1177/136216880100500302](https://doi.org/10.1177/136216880100500302).
- Froyd, Jeffrey and Nancy Simpson. "Student-Centered Learning: Addressing Faculty Question about Student-Centered Learning." *Conference on Course, Curriculum, and Laboratory Improvement*, 13-15 Aug 2008, Renaissance Hotel, Washington, DC. www.cclconference.org/files/2010/03/Froyd_Stu-CenteredLearning.pdf.
- Garrett, Peter and Terry Shortall. "Learners' Evaluations of Teacher-Fronted and Student-Centered Classroom Activities." *Language Teaching Research*, vol. 6 no. 1, 2002, pp. 25-57. DOI:[10.1191/1362168802lr0960a](https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168802lr0960a).
- Haley, Marjorie H. "Learner-Centered Instruction and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences with Second Language Learners." *Teachers College Record*, vol. 106 no. 1, 2004, pp. 163-180. DOI:[10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00326.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00326.x).
- Hannafin, Michael, et al. "Re-Examining Cognition During Student-Centered, Web-Based Learning." *Educational Technology Research and Development*, vol. 57 no. 6, 2009, pp. 767-785. DOI:[10.1007/sl1423-009-9117-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/sl1423-009-9117-x).
- Motschnig-Pitrik, Renate and Andreas Holzinger. "Student-Centered Teaching Meets New

- Media: Concept and Case Study.” Educational Technology and Society, vol. 5 no. 4, 2002, pp. 160-172. DOI:d261/09da9d90bc1cb6d0b83d92d2ca356d62a13e.pdf.
- O’Neill, Geraldine, and Tim McMahon. “Student-Centered Learning: What Does It Mean For Students and Lecturers.” The National Forum Teaching and Learning Scholarship Database, Dublin: AISHE, 1 Jan. 2005, www.eprints.teachingandlearning.ie/3345/. Accessed 19 May. 2018.
- Pedersen, Susan and Min Liu. “Teachers’ Beliefs about Issues in the Implementation of a Student-Centered Learning Environment.” Educational Technology Research and Development, vol. 51 no. 2, 2003, pp. 57-76. DOI:10.1007/BF02504526.
- Smith, Gary A. “First-Day Questions for the Learner-Centered Classroom.” The National Teaching and Learning Forum, vol. 17 no. 5, 2008, pp. 1-4. [d32ogoqmya1dw8.cloudfront.net/files/introgeo/firstday/first day questions learner-ce.pdf](http://d32ogoqmya1dw8.cloudfront.net/files/introgeo/firstday/first%20day%20questions%20learner-centered.pdf). Accessed 24 June 2018.
- Thamraksa, Chutima. “Student-Centered Learning: Demystifying the Myth.” Studies in Language and Language Teaching, vol. 12, 2003, pp. 59-70. DOI:10.1.1.499.66andrep=rep1andtype=pdf.
- Wichadee, Saovapa. “Developing the Self-Directed Learning Instructional Model to Enhance English Reading Ability and Self-Directed Learning of Undergraduate Students.” Journal of College Teaching and Learning, vol. 8 no. 12, 2011, pp. 43-52. DOI:10.19030/tlc.v8i12.6620.

