

# Learner-centredness

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insist that we have to know why we do what we do.

In traditional Chinese pedagogy, teachers commonly employ the cramming method (known also as 'jug-and-mug' or 'talk-and-chalk'). The students are bench-bound listeners, with no requirement to take responsibility for their learning and no encouragement to autonomy. This hinders the development of their independence and prevents them from employing their own learning styles, exploring learning according to their own thinking, and working at their own pace.

The reform of language teaching and learning in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought a shift away from the structural to the functional and thence a movement towards a more interactional style of classroom teaching. As part of this process, the cognitive theory of language teaching and learning has become widely accepted in place of the behavioural theory, and the role of the learners in achieving success in teaching and learning has gained more emphasis.

However, some teachers assume that learner-centredness is a kind of classroom technique in which all classroom activities are done by the students and TTT (Teacher Talking Time) is replaced by STT (Student Talking Time). Some even believe that it is a devaluing of their own professional roles. Because of this, many teachers are at a loss to know – how to plan and organise their lessons properly.

Learner-centredness is not merely a simple redistribution of TTT and STT; it is much more than that. In the broader sense, it is a teaching philosophy with a lot of underlying support.

## Educating the learner

The term *learner-centredness* refers to shifts in the roles of teachers and learners where both are co-learners engaged in continuing processes of learning, reframing and transforming knowledge. As David Nunan says, ... *learner-centred instruction is not a matter of handing over rights and powers to learners in a unilateral way. Nor does it involve devaluing the teacher. Rather, it is a matter of educating learners so that they can gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning.* Learner-centred

education uses strategies which elicit and build upon a student's interests, motivation and skills.

Learners learn most effectively when they are fully involved in the learning process, designing, exploring and completing tasks at their own pace. Moreover, learner-centredness gives learners a sense of control over what they are doing, which will facilitate their interest and engagement and help them understand that they can influence what they learn and how they learn.

Teachers are often told that these are the advantages of learner-centred teaching, but we believe they need to understand the rationale that lies behind the theory – where it has come from and what supporting evidence there is for its success.

## Educating the whole person

One of the essential underpinnings of learner-centredness is whole-person education, a movement that became popular in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. This emphasises two important aspects of language teaching and learning: cognition and affect (the emotional factors that influence language learning, which will be discussed further below). Whole-person education pays attention not only to the cultivation of the students' intelligence quotient (IQ) but also to that of their emotional quotient (EQ).

The humanistic approach to language teaching has much in common with whole-person education and also puts great emphasis on the importance of affect. According to Jack Richards, the humanistic approach underlies all methods in which the following principles are held to be important:

- the development of human values
- growth of self-awareness and understanding of others
- sensitivity to human feelings and emotions
- active student involvement in learning and in the way learning takes place

The last of these four principles is the one that most concerns us here because of its implications for learner-

centredness. Like whole-person education, the humanistic approach, as the name indicates, is an approach rather than a method. Teachers cannot simply pick it up and put into practice because it is about *how* we should teach rather than providing a prescribed set of activities or techniques to follow. Instead, teachers need to absorb the principles that lie behind it, use it to influence the way they behave in real-world teaching situations and adapt it to their particular circumstances. Teachers may also use other relevant methods which embody the concept of learner-centredness, such as the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, etc.

## Intelligence and emotions

As stated above, cognition and affect are two important factors in language learning. They are often seen as working in parallel rather than being opposites between which we have to choose. Although psychologists agree that people who are emotionally unstable are seldom successful in the careers they pursue, does this justify the fact that many educational institutions are now placing more emphasis on the fostering of the students' EQ than of their IQ?

Ernest Hilgard recognised the need for an integrative approach, asserting that purely cognitive learning will be rejected unless a role is assigned to affectivity. Gross says of the contribution made by affect: *'It is now apparent that learning can be enlivened and strengthened by activating more of the brain's potential. We can accelerate and enrich our learning, by engaging the senses, emotion, imagination.'*

In his affective filter hypothesis, Krashen declares that successful second language acquisition depends on the learner's feelings. He further states that 'negative attitudes (including a lack of motivation or self-confidence and anxiety) are said to act as a filter, preventing the learner from making use of input, and thus hindering success in *language learning*.'

It is true that learners are influenced by their feelings and do not learn effectively when anxious or stressed; they

learn best when they feel secure. As Jane Arnold says, 'Negative emotions typically lead to defensive reactions, which include the passive (falling asleep, day-dreaming, mental sluggishness -familiar in classrooms) as well as the aggressive. Positive emotions have the opposite effect, opening the mind – to learning, among other things.'

**A humanistic approach**

The term *rapport* refers both to the relationship between the teacher and students and to that among the students themselves. Research has shown that rapport plays a role in successful language teaching and learning. In traditional Chinese classrooms, many teachers take it for granted that their sole responsibility is to make sure the students achieve satisfactory results at school so that they can get good jobs. They ignore what the students feel and how they feel in the process of learning. They refuse to enter the inner world of the students, assuming that if they get close to the students, they will take advantage. When this idea is deeply rooted in their minds, it is only natural that there should be a large gulf between teacher and students. But without rapport between teacher and class, how can teachers get feedback from their students and how can they adjust their teaching in response to such feedback?

As mentioned above, rapport can also refer to the relationship between the students. It has also been shown that students do not learn well if there is no rapport amongst them. Team spirit, cooperation, collaboration and a harmonious atmosphere in class are the guarantee of students' successful learning. So, from the perspective of learner-centredness, it is necessary for teachers to foster a climate of caring and sharing in the language class, both between them and their students and between the students themselves.

Motivation is also a crucial component of learner-centredness. Noam Chomsky points out its importance when he says, 'The truth of the matter is that about 99 per cent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material.'

The term *motivation* refers to the factors that determine a person's desire to do something. A student lacking motivation is unlikely to be academically successful.

In order to ensure that the students are motivated, Jane Arnold suggests that four activities be avoided in class:

| Traditional                                                                   | Cooperative                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teachers are expected to have all answers clear.                              | Teachers are allowed to say 'I don't know'.                     |
| Teachers are expected to suppress emotions (and so are students).             | Teachers are allowed to express emotions (and so are students). |
| Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty.          | Innovative approaches to problem solving are encouraged.        |
| Students admire brilliance in teachers.                                       | Students admire friendliness in teachers                        |
| Students expect the teacher to show them 'the way'.                           | Students are expected to find their own way.                    |
| Students should speak in class only when called upon to do so by the teacher. | Students are encouraged to volunteer their own thoughts.        |

- Those which the students think unpleasant.
- Those which conflict with the learning goals of the students.
- Those which are below or above the coping potential of the students.
- Those which are harmful to the students' self/social image.

**An educational approach**

The role of the teacher is, of course, crucial to the implementation of learner-centredness. No matter what advanced theories are advocated and no matter how good the textbooks are which are being used, learner-centredness will not happen if the teacher's role remains unchanged.

Traditionally, Chinese teachers are very talkative and dominant in class, and this reduces the students' ability to explore their learning and, consequently, reduces their involvement. The whole process of teaching is quite mechanical.

How should the role of the teacher change to create a learner-centred classroom? An examination of some of the common roles that teachers play in most of the major teaching approaches may help.

The teacher can act as a controller, having appropriate control over what the students learn and how they learn it, an organiser, a prompter, a participant, a resource-provider and an assessor. In ad-

dition, the teacher can act as a counselor. In other words, the teacher should not only help the students solve their academic problems but also help them solve their emotional problems, if they have any, so that they can concentrate fully on what is being taught without any distractions.

Our traditional educational system is based on the central role of the teacher in the planning, disseminating and evaluating of learning while western cultures emphasise nondirective, nonauthoritative roles and teaching styles. Listed in the table above are a number of cultural expectations of roles and styles related to teachers, students and schools as outlined by Brown. They are divided into *traditional*, which would be recognised in China, and *cooperative, reflecting traditions* where *more* learner-centred teaching is the norm.

**Cooperative learning**

The features of cooperative learning shown in the table can help foster the development of social skills that students need to communicate and interact with diverse groups of people.

A cooperative learning class involves social interaction and negotiation of meaning among group members. They engage in tasks to which all group members have something to contribute, and they all learn from each other. As students work in pairs and groups, they share information and come to each other's aid, like a team whose players must work together in order to achieve a goal. The one downside of cooperative learning is that it is difficult for teachers to evaluate an individual student's performance. Nevertheless, it has many advantages:

- It fosters a positive affective learning environment.
- Anxiety is reduced (and, as a result, self-confidence, self-esteem and motivation are increased).
- It helps students to develop a more flexible learning style.
- Language of interaction is generated
- Learner responsibility and learner autonomy are promoted.

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Learner-centredness is an approach rather than a method, and does not deliver concrete procedures for teachers to follow. Nevertheless, if we understand the essence of learner-centredness and the ideas on which it is based, then it will be easier to put the theory into practice in the classroom. Certainly in China, the idea that learner-centredness brings many benefits is gaining more and more momentum.

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