

Tursunov M. M.

*“English philology and literature” department
Bukhara State University*

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEACHER-CENTERED AND LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSES

The following article deals with the advantages and disadvantages of student-centered and teacher-centered classes by comparing the methods due to theoretical and practical points.

Nowadays, teaching foreign languages has greatly changed. A number of modern, innovative methods, techniques and ways of teaching are being implemented in foreign language classes. Today, a teacher should try to vary the methods he is using in class in order to get students involved in teaching and learning process as actively as possible. The role of a teacher in modern methodology usually differs from the role the teacher played in class before. Teachers are more facilitators now rather than being dominants in class. This role gives learners of foreign languages more opportunities to participate in classes more actively being enthusiastic, persevering, independent, and creative. Today the terms “teacher-centered” and “student-centered” classes have already been widely used in methodology.

It is urgent to find out differences and similarities of student-centered and teacher-centered classes, to analyze advantages and disadvantages of such classes in methodology. We are going to focus on these classes to see the effects more exactly and clearly.

Student-centered learning, also known as learner-centered education, broadly encompasses methods of teaching that shift the focus of instruction from the teacher to the student. In original usage, student-centered learning aims to develop learner autonomy and independence by putting responsibility for the learning path in the hands of students. Student-centered instruction focuses on skills and practices that enable lifelong learning and independent problem-solving. Student-centered learning theory and practice are based on the constructivist learning theory that emphasizes the learner’s critical role in constructing meaning from new information and prior experience.

As Leo Jones claims student-centered learning puts students’ interests first, acknowledging student voice as central to the learning experience. In a student-centered learning space, students choose what they will learn, how they will learn, and how they will assess their own learning. This is in contrast to traditional education, also

dubbed “teacher-centered learning”, which situates the teacher as the primarily “active” role while students take a more “passive”, receptive role. In a teacher-centered classroom, teachers choose what the students will learn, how the students will learn, and how the students will be assessed on their learning. In contrast, student-centered learning requires students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning and with their own pace of learning [1].

Weimer’s key changes toward learner-centered teaching can be listed as the following: a) the function of content; b) the role of the teacher; c) the responsibility for learning; d) the purposes and processes of assessment e) the balance of power [2].

Usage of the term “student-centered learning” may also simply refer to educational mindsets or instructional methods that recognize individual differences in learners. In this sense, student-centered learning emphasizes each student’s interests, abilities, and learning styles, placing the teacher as a facilitator of learning for individuals rather than for the class as a whole.

In a student-centered class, students don’t depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instructions, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise. They don’t ignore each other, but look at each other and communicate with each other. They value each other’s contributions; they cooperate, learn from each other, and help each other. When in difficulty or in doubt, they do ask the teacher for help or advice but only after they have tried to solve the problem among themselves, the emphasis is on working together, in pairs, in groups, and as a whole class. Their teacher helps them to develop their language skills.

A student-centered classroom isn’t a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do. It’s a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time. The teacher’s role is more that of a facilitator than

instructor; the students are active participants in the learning process. The teacher (and the textbook) help to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn — and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process. In a student-centered class, at different times, students may be working alone, in pairs, or in groups:

- Working alone, preparing ideas or making notes before a discussion, doing a listening task, doing a short written assignment, or doing grammar or vocabulary exercises;
- Working together in pairs or groups, comparing and discussing their answers, or reading and reacting to one another's written work and suggesting improvements;
- Working together in discussions or in role-plays, sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences;
- Interacting with the teacher and the whole class, asking questions or brainstorming ideas;

Also in a student-centered class, students may be teacher-led:

- Before students work together, their teacher will help them prepare to work together with explanations and pronunciation practice.

While students are working together, their teacher will be available to give advice and encouragement.

- After they've finished working together, and the class is reassembled, their teacher will give them feedback, offer suggestions and advice, make corrections, and answer questions.

When students are working together in English, they

- Talk more
- Share their ideas
- Learn from each other
- Are more involved
- Feel more secure and less anxious
- Use English in a meaningful, realistic way
- Enjoy using English to communicate

But some of them may

- Feel nervous, embarrassed, or tongue-tied
- Speak English and make a lot of mistakes
- Speak in their native language, not in English
- Not enjoy working together

The challenges described above may somehow be solved with the help of special techniques and methods. Classroom management is an important issue here to overcome probable difficulties.

In a crowded classroom, we may not even be able to reach some students as we circulate. We may need to rearrange the students and where they sit. It's also important for students to sit close together so that they can talk softly and still hear one another. A lot of students talking loudly make a lot of noise!

- Keep track of which groups you listen to so no one gets left out.
- Rearrange groups to be near enough for you to overhear as you walk around.
- Seat students close together so they can talk softly and still hear one another.

Very small classes may also cause some disorganization in student-centered classes. How should students in a very small class work together? Should we take part in discussions as an equal partner? In a small class, students tend to be more teacher-dependent, waiting for praise or encouragement while they talk. It's hard to monitor a conversation and participate in an activity at the same time. It may be better to sit outside the group while students work together, and not be part of the group. Nodding encouragement, showing interest, and answering questions are fine, but constant intervention isn't likely to encourage students to behave autonomously. We need to judge when it's helpful to add a comment or contribution, or when it's spoon-feeding.

- Avoid becoming part of the groups — small classes tend to be overly teacher-dependent.
- Encourage students and answer their questions as you move from group to group.

In many ways, every class is a mixed-ability class. Even students who have studied together all the time will have varied mastery of the language or remember different things. Some will be better at different skills: reading, writing, listening, or speaking. They bring their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles to the class. We don't want our better students to be held up by the weaker ones, or the weaker ones to feel intimidated by the better ones. We may need to arrange pairs and groups differently for different kinds of activities, sometimes putting weaker and stronger students in different groups, sometimes mixing weaker and stronger students (in the hope the stronger ones will encourage and help the weaker ones), and sometimes giving students different tasks according to their strengths and weaknesses. There are no hard and fast rules about what to do — we make our decisions based on our knowledge of each class and the individuals within it. This can be hard to do in a very large class, particularly if it meets only once a week. We may have to just hope for the best when arranging groups. Mistakes are sure to happen: Weaker students may not be able to cope, and stronger students may get bored.

Pointing to the key features of a teacher-centered class we are not going to reject this type of classes completely. If a teacher keeps every step of a class in balance, even teacher-centered lessons may somehow be interesting, involving and motivating in case the most appropriate ways or methods in teaching are chosen. However, a learner-centered class may probably be called as a more

comfortable or even easier class for teachers as their duties are only controlling or facilitating the process of the lesson. Even learner-centered classes may be held badly if a teacher takes a wrong position in it by breaking a normal direction of the lesson. In both cases the responsibility falls under the teacher's ability, skillfulness and responsibility to hold an effective class.

In general, we can claim that teachers should try to use student-centered classes more in teaching as it gets learners motivated, interested and involved in foreign language classes.

References

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2. Maryellen Weimer, Learning Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice, Jossey-Bass, 2002.
3. www.teachingenglish.com