FROM FIRM GROUND TO SHIFTING SANDS: ISSUES IN ADOPTING LEARNER-CENTRED ESL/EFL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper recognises that all new approaches and methods of language teaching may have sound theoretical justifications, but the adoption of these in most classrooms, especially in the third world countries, is problematic in some way or other. Curriculum developers and policy makers are often carried away by the new proposals and are eager to subscribe to them probably because questioning the assumptions underlying these proposals coming from theoreticians from developed countries might amount to being labelled 'old fashioned' or 'resistant to change'. Implementing learner-centred methods in an ESL/EFL context is one such proposal. The paper attempts to present some of the problems and challenges an ESL/EFL teacher may face in trying to adopt learner-centred methods in his/her teaching. It argues that unless these are identified, discussed and addressed, teaching and learning in such a context will not be as effective as one would like or expect to be. The issues and concerns raised in this paper are relevant and valid for other subject areas besides second or foreign language teaching.

Keywords: Learner-centredness, English language teaching, learner-centred methodology

Introduction

All new approaches and methods of language teaching are grounded in sound theories, but the application of these in the classroom is problematic in some way or other. Unless these problem issues are identified and discussed rather than swept under the carpet, these new proposals may not be as effective as they are claimed to be.

The belief that only those who quickly adopt the new proposals as and when they are introduced by experts qualify to be 'good teachers' is rather untenable. Curriculum developers and policy makers may easily be carried away by new ideas because of the need to be fashionable and those who feel like questioning some of the assumptions underlying the proposals do not dare do it for fear of being labelled 'old-fashioned' and 'resistant to change'.

Changing one's approach to teaching and learning for the sake of changing without conviction or without being aware of and convinced about the practicability of new proposals is not good educational practice. If it is done, the danger is that it is attempted without being fully prepared either in terms of a thorough conceptual understanding or the practical skills required for implementing it in toto. It may be done half-heartedly, i.e. *de jure*, not *de facto*, in order to join the band of 'supporters' of the new approach or method. Learner-centred teaching is no exception. As O'Neill (1991) has pointed out, there are only 'good' or 'bad' lessons, irrespective of the approach or method they are based on.

Context
In the context of Oman, one of the countries in the Gulf, the Ministry of Education decided to adopt child-centred classroom methodologies (CCCM) in 1998 as part of its efforts to reform the school education system. A lot of effort was put in to integrate CCCM into teaching and learning in all subjects. In 2004, however, when teachers' knowledge and practice of CCCM was found to be very low even after about six years, the Ministry decided to implement it as a project in 36 Basic Education schools from five different regions. The results of two programme assessments made in 2006 revealed that the practice had not still improved much and that teachers had many misconceptions about CCCM and that the training needed to be more efficient (Al-Salami, 2010). In March 2010, the results of a project study designed to measure the effectiveness of the learner-centred methodology in the pre-service education methods course in the only public university in Oman were reported at a conference (Al-Humaidi et al., 2010). Very little research has been undertaken and reported on the implementation of learner-centred pedagogy as discussed in this paper in the context of higher education in the gulf region in general and Oman in particular.

The dominant pedagogic approach in higher education is teacher-centred, which takes various forms (Al-Balushi, 2010), although many higher education institutions in the Gulf refer to 'lifelong self-learners', 'self-directed learning', 'independent learners', and so on as part of their objectives statements or

graduate attributes. It is also claimed that attempts to adopt learning- and learner-centred education are "likely to be hindered by culture, language, politics, economy, teaching practices and student characteristics" (Rahal, 2010, p.35). According to Fulcher (2004, p.1), learner-centred education, which emphasises the learner and the learning processes and outcomes, "faces many challenges when introduced to many university centres where faculty socialization into subject-centred teaching is the dominant ethos." In view of such statements, the adoption of learner-centred methods in higher education seems to be problematic. It is in this background that a close examination of the pros and cons of a learner-centred pedagogy is attempted in this paper, so that the practical implications of adopting it, especially in the Gulf context, may be recognized and addressed.

Theoretical Underpinnings

It is interesting to note that several buzzwords have become fashionable to use these days without perhaps the stakeholders being aware of their practical implications. The buzzwords of today are *communicative, interactive, learner-centred* and *needs analysis* (Young, 2000, p.72). In his review of thirty years of TEFL/TESL, Richards (2002, p.15) refers to the strand that emerged in the seventies with a focus on the learner "under the rubric of *individualized instruction* and more generally, *individualization*." This included *self-access learning*, *self-directed learning*, and the movement towards *learner autonomy*, all of which "focus on the learner as an individual and seek to encourage learner initiative and to respect learner differences." *Individualization* was replaced in the 1980s "by the term *learner-centredness*, which refers to the belief that attention to the nature of learners should be central to all aspects of language teaching, including planning teaching and evaluation." In this view, learning depends upon the nature and will of learners.

One such buzzword which is widely used in the literature on teaching and learning is the term student-centred learning. Other terms used in the literature linked to this are flexible learning (Taylor, 2000), experiential learning (Burnard, 1999), and self-directed learning (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005, p.27). The concept of student-centred learning is credited to Hayward in the beginning of the last century and to Dewey in the 1950s (O'Sullivan, 2004). Rogers (1983, p.25) expanded the concept of client-centred counselling into a general theory of education. He refers to a shift in power from the expert teacher (in a teacher-centred educational atmosphere, where students become passive, apathetic and bored) to the student learner. The idea is also linked to the work of Piaget and more recently with that of Malcolm Knowles (Burnard, 1999). Another related concept is that of child-centred education, which is derived from the work of Froebel (Simon, 1999).

The notion of learner-centred education, if not the classroom practices aligned with that notion, has been advocated by many over a long historical period with different meanings in different historical contexts (Chung & Walsh, 2000). Plato suggested strategic questioning to ensure learner-centred education. Rousseau argued that education should build on the natural activity, both physical and mental, of children and that individual differences among children and the stages of their development are central to education (Darling, 1994). Froebel maintained that schooling should fit the child's stages of development (Chung & Walsh, 2000).

There seems to be, however, no single theoretical basis for student-centred learning in the literature. It appears to relate primarily to the 'constructivist' view of learning in the importance it places on *activity, discovery* and *independent learning* (Carlile & Jordan, 2005). While the cognitive theory emphasises activities in the learner's head (or the mind), the constructivist view emphasises activities, such as projects and practicals, in which students are required to engage themselves in some form of physical activity. The social-constructivist view of learning also emphasises activities and the importance of communities of practice/others in the learning process. However, definitions of student-centred learning in the literature do not necessarily highlight the importance of peers in learning (Bredo, 1999; Cobb, 1999).

Learner-centredness is reflected by recognising learners' prior knowledge; their needs, goals and wishes; learning styles and preferences; and their views of teaching and learning and the nature of classroom activities. Consequently, in learner-centred approaches, "course design and teaching often become negotiated processes through *needs analysis*" (Nunan, 1988, p.16). Such an approach was extensively used in the Australian Migrant Education Programme. Since learners' needs, expectations and resources vary from one group of learners to another, their needs should be identified through needs analysis so that a more learner-centred course or curriculum can be constructed (Young 2000, p.72).

Student-centred lessons are characterised by very little explicit teacher control. They are often open in structure and students work in groups "cooperatively without much teacher involvement." Thus, low teacher involvement, lots of group activities, etc. are regarded as the most positive and essential characteristics of learner-centredness (O'Neill, 1991, p.298). Teacher-directed or teacher-fronted lessons, on the other hand, are characterised by a high level of explicit teacher control, the primary decisions being taken and carried out by the teacher based on his or her perceptions and priorities.

Learner-centred education is based on the theory that students learn by actively constructing and assimilating knowledge rather than by passive addition of discrete facts to an existing store of knowledge (Hardman et al., 2008). It is based on the desire to ensure that learners are effectively equipped with competencies in creative intelligence, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers are being urged to move away from teacher-centred methods to a more discovery-based learning where greater emphasis is placed on outcomes that are broader than a basic recall of facts and information (Hardman et al., 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Sam, 1990; UNESCO, 2007; Vavrus, 2009; Vethamani, 2003; Vilches, 2002).

In learner-centred education, there is a shift away from fundamentally teacher-centred decisions about teaching and learning activities presented in a pre-determined sequence to learning opportunities for the learners to achieve learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2007). The key decisions should include "What is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgements are made and by whom these judgements are made" (Gibbs, 1995, p.1).

It is worth mentioning here that three elements emerge as essential requirements for student-centred teaching: *choice, action* and *readiness*. While interpreting Rogers' (1983) ideas of student-centredness, Burnard (1999, p.244) emphasises the concept of choice in student-centred learning: "Students might not only choose <u>what</u> to study, but <u>how</u> and <u>why</u> that topic might be an interesting one to study." Harden and Crosby (2000, p.335) emphasise the concept of the student 'doing' things in student-centred teaching. While student-centred learning focuses on the student's learning and "what the students do to achieve this, rather than what the teacher does", teacher-centred learning strategies focus on the teacher transmitting knowledge, from the expert to the novice. Simon (1999) emphasises the concept of the student's readiness in child-centred education. The idea is that the teacher should act as a guide, without interfering with this process of maturation. Education is linked with the process of child development or readiness; that is, the child will learn only when it is ready to learn.

Learner-centredness is not simply the teacher-held assumption that all learners prefer interactive and communicative learning situations, styles and strategies. If we really want to put the learner at the centre of the learning experience, our duty then is to offer a broad spectrum of learning activities that require deployment of a variety of learning strategies (Young 2000, p.74). Critical thinking, problem solving and creativity are encouraged through critical learning environments that challenge learners to confront problems (Bain, 2004).

The review of literature points to some ideas that are frequently discussed in relation to learner-centred approach and methods and these serve to focus on the essential features of the learner-centred methods:

- The learner has full responsibility for his/her learning.
- Learner involvement and participation are necessary for learning.
- The relationship between learners is more equal, promoting growth and development.
- The teacher is only a facilitator of student's learning and a resource person.
- The learner experiences a confluence of cognitive and affective learning in his education.
- The learner sees himself/herself differently as a result of the learning experience.
  (Brandes & Ginnes, 1986)

In essence, the tenets of student-centred teaching, according to the literature on student-centred learning, are:

- the reliance on active rather than on passive learning,
- an emphasis on deep learning and understanding,
- an emphasis on process and competence, rather than content,
- increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student,
- an increased sense of autonomy in the learner,
- an interdependence and negotiation between teacher and learner,
- mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship, and
- a reflective approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner (Gibbs, 1995; Lea et al., 2003).

Implications for Practice

There are several implications of adopting a student-centred approach or methods in higher education:

Curriculum design

1. *Modularization of courses*: This allows students an element of choice. Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) refer to the importance of attempting to focus on the needs of students at the early stage of curriculum design. However, there are difficulties in providing such choice in the curriculum (Edwards, 2001).

2. *Problem-based learning*: This addresses the 'active learning' aspect of student-centred learning (Boud & Feletti, 1997). The aspect of learner

responsibility aligns with the observation of Lea et al. (2003) that student-centred learning involves students taking increased responsibility and accountability. It should, however, be remembered that problem-based learning differs from problem solving or problem-oriented exercises in a lecture/tutorial in that the latter are teacher-controlled in presentation and outcome (Davis & Harden, 1999).

3. ***Emphasis on learning outcomes*:** Learning outcomes focus on what the students will be able to do rather than on content to be covered by the teacher. This is an example of the move towards student-centred learning in the curriculum. There is a shift in emphasis from the *coverage* model to learners *doing* (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005).

4. ***Emphasis on process and competence*:** The emphasis should be on the process of learning and developing students' competence, rather than the content of learning.

Methods of teaching and learning
In a study on student-centred learning practices in the University of Glasgow, four main stages have been identified (University of Glasgow, 2004):
1. To make students more active in acquiring knowledge and skills – including in-class exercises, field work, and the use of computer-assisted learning packages
2. To make students more aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it
3. To focus on interaction, such as the use of tutorials and other discussion groups
4. To focus on transferable skills; that is, going beyond course requirements to other benefits to students in later employment.

Some of the examples of student-centred learning/teaching are (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005, p.31):
- In-Class**:** Buzz groups (short discussion in twos); Pyramids/snowballing (Buzz groups continuing the discussion into larger groups); Cross-overs (mixing students into groups by letter/number allocations); Rounds (giving turns to individual students to talk); Quizzes; Writing reflections on learning; Student class presentations; Role-play; Poster presentations; Students producing mind maps in class.
- Out-of-class**:** Group discussion; Independent projects; Peer mentoring of other students; Debates; Field trips; Practicals; Reflective dairies,

learning journals; Computer assisted learning; Choice in subjects for study/projects; Writing newspaper articles; Portfolio development.

Assessment practices

1. ***More formative assessment*:** More formative assessment should be added, which emphasises feedback to students on their learning in order to enhance their learning (Brown et al., 1997; Light & Cox, 2001). This can provide a focus for the students by highlighting gaps in their learning and areas that they can develop. In this way, it encourages a more student-centred approach (Gibbs, 1995). Examples of student-centred assessments are: diaries, logs and journals; portfolios; peer and self-assessment; projects; group work; profiles.

2. ***Peer and self-assessment*:** These give some control and responsibility back to the students, emphasising that the learner has an increased sense of autonomy (Lea et al., 2003).

3. ***Choice of assessment methods*:** There is also the need to provide students with the choice of assessment methods, as the concept of choice implies choice in what to study as well as how the student will be assessed (Gibbs, 1995; Brown et al., 1994). Examples of the assessment process in student-centred learning are:
   - Involving students at the stage of task setting: Choosing and setting the assessment task; Discussing and setting the assessment criteria.
   - Involving students at the stage of task completion: Making self and peer assessment comments; Suggesting, negotiating and assigning grades/marks for self-assessment; Assigning grades/marks for peer assessment.

It is thus important to understand the meaning of the term student-centred learning and the associated concepts, as well as the wide range of implications of adopting such an approach to teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. Equally important to the discussion is a critique of the approach and its practical, implementation aspects.

Issues in Implementing Student-Centred Learning

There is overwhelming evidence from research into classroom practices that the idea of learner-centred education has not taken root in the classrooms and that teacher-centred methods still dominate the average classroom (see Hardman et al., 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). According to Lea et al. (2003, p.322), "many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centred learning into

practice, but in reality they are not." While policy makers and teacher educators often blame the teachers for failing to implement learner-centred methods in their classrooms, they are rarely aware of the underlying issues and challenges that might stand in the way of appropriating and adopting learner-centred methods in real classrooms. It is, therefore, necessary to examine the challenges of adopting learner-centred methods in practice in most classrooms, especially in developing countries.

At the outset, by focusing completely on the individual learner, as required by student-centred learning, the needs of the whole class will not be taken into account (Simon, 1999; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Student-centred learning may also deemphasise the importance of the social context of learning and the value of interaction with peers in the socio-cultural view of learning (Bredo, 1999).

It is also reported that students are concerned about being physically isolated from other learners (Edwards, 2001) and being abandoned or isolated from other supports (Lea et al., 2003). An inherent danger of believing that teacher talk is always wasteful and should, therefore, be avoided as much as possible may lead to student neglect. Student neglect occurs when the teacher is supposed to provide accurate or good models of language use and to discuss students' errors (as in the context of the gulf region), but refuses (or fails) to intervene because it would have been "interventionist" (O'Neill,1991, p.296). Such neglect would have very serious consequences for learners with limited english proficiency (LEP), whose communication is shallow and not helpful in enriching their competence in the target language (ibid., p.297). Teachers and teacher trainers should, therefore, be cautious about maintaining that a complete absence of teacher intervention is one of the desirable criteria of a communicative activity.

Moreover, learner-centred pedagogy requires restructuring the curricula and school structure substantially in order to engage learners' ideas and interests and to develop their knowledge and skills in key areas (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Muncey & Mcquillan, 1996). This raises questions about whether this model can be implemented in developing countries with fewer resources than developed countries. Student-centred learning is a Western approach to learning and may not necessarily transfer to developing countries with limited resources and different learning cultures (O'Sullivan, 2004). Even in the Western context, student-centred learning cannot be implemented in the system of large classes associated with many undergraduate courses and it may be more prevalent in the later years of student degree programmes (University of Glasgow, 2004).

Another important requirement of student-centred teaching is that it should be based on the needs of individual students. Even within the same teaching environment and institution, in which monolingual learners inhabit the same linguistic culture, there will exist a variety of contrasting student-perceived needs. "Even if we endeavour to respond to those demands, as perceived by the students themselves, ascertained through questionnaire, by interview, or by any other effective means, we will be overwhelmed by the sheer variety of demand" (Young 2000, p.72).

In a heterogeneous student population in terms of student-perceived needs, consequently, there is a wide range of preferred learning styles and strategies. "To impose particular task and activity types (in the name of learner-centredness), reflecting only current methodologies and ideologies may well deny some students their preferences and thereby exclude them from full participation in the learning process" (Young, 2000, pp.72-73). This shows a zealous fervour for modernity or pious adherence to the latest research.

A purely learner-centred curriculum would surely involve not only adopting the preferred methods and strategies of each and every individual learner (an impossibly tall order in most circumstances, even where the learners' needs are identifiable), but also learner-selected content and materials (Young, 2000, p.73). The greatest possibility of realising the goal of learner-centredness lies in the one-to-one teaching situation, and in such a situation, ironically perhaps, learners tend to expect the teacher to make and take the learning decisions. In the gulf region, curricula and syllabuses are exam-oriented. In such contexts, learner-centred content is not always a practical option (Young, 2000, p.74).

Yet another challenge in adopting student-centred teaching practices is that the very idea of learner-centredness may not be consistent with the beliefs of students and teachers in relation to learning. It may be rejected as frightening or not within their remit by students who value or have experienced more teacher-focused approaches (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Students and also some teachers may also be suspicious of the value of student-centred learning methods (Stevenson & Sander, 2002). Tarone and Yule (1989) noted that if students from a traditional language classroom background are put in a more informal setting in which the teacher plays a less dominant role and expects students to be responsible for their own learning, "they may feel that their teacher just doesn't know how to do the job properly" (p.9). Students' preconceptions regarding what constitutes a language classroom may thus inhibit their learning to that extent. Some socio-cultural contexts favour learner-centred approaches and methods

rather than others; teachers may also have fear of losing control over their students in class (Sam, 1990).

A tension may arise between teachers' and students' expectations because of a conflict between the two. Canagarajah (1993) found his ESL students resistant to the collaborative and process-oriented curriculum he was trying to create. Nunan (1995) examined conflicting classroom expectations of teachers and students (e.g., students' resistance to the pedagogical agenda of the teacher or to the curriculum itself). Jing (2006) found learner resistance to a meta-cognition-training project in his EFL reading course, possibly because of the conflict in the agenda of the students and the teacher as well as differences between their short-term and long-term goals.

Besides, in attempting to provide students with significant responsibility for their own learning, a tension may develop between teacher-as-expert and teacher-as-facilitator. In their student-centred classroom, Whitmore and Crowell (1994, p.66) noted that sometimes the students "make worthwhile decisions; sometimes they do not, and logical, somewhat unpleasant consequences result." Schwarzer (2003) observed that, according to some of his students, the freedom that student-centred learning offers was often being 'abused' by some of their classmates who did not take enough responsibility for their learning or did not mutually respect other members of the learning community.

In a learner-centred approach, learners are expected to take decisions on their learning and review their own progress. A major criticism of learner-centred pedagogy is that it takes away some level of responsibility from the teacher, which may make teachers feel a loss of authority and control (Weimer, 2002). Bloom (2007), while recounting her first-time experience of negotiating a curriculum for a Spanish course for healthcare professionals, recorded the "inner conflict" she "had to overcome as a relatively inexperienced teacher" (p.94). She noted thus in her anecdotal record for the seventh week in class: "I left this class feeling really frustrated. I am finding that one of the drawbacks of presenting a negotiated curriculum and attempting to have it learner-centred is that students seem to be taking advantage of that fact by not doing work in class. I am feeling like I have little authority in the classroom, which is OK, but the problem is that I feel like I have little respect in the classroom as well" (p.93).

Bloom (2007, p.94) further reported that "Students' reactions to student-centred activities were mixed, and a tension developed between those who demonstrated self-efficacy in their language learning and those who maintained a *laissez faire* work ethic." She expected that her students "would embrace self-directed learning time", but "was surprised by their misuse of class time" (p.95). Based on

her experience, she concluded that "A teacher cannot just provide time for self-directed learning or open-ended assignments and expect that all students will take full responsibility" (p.95).

It may also be found that students are unfamiliar with the term itself and the concept (Lea et al., 2003). In their study on psychology students in the University of Plymouth, 60% of them had not heard of the term, despite a University policy on student-centredness in teaching and learning (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005, p.34).

It is commonly believed that the best language learning situation is relatively 'open' in structure, in which students can talk freely with one another even during instructional activities. However, classes that were open in structure and those that made heavy use of individual work were among those found to be least successful for language learning (Wong-Fillmore 1985, p.24). Wong-Fillmore's research suggests that teacher-centred or teacher-fronted lessons can be far more effective than student-centred ones if they are 'good' lessons. According to O'Neill (1991, p.301), few of the experts who advocate student-centred lessons have presented any real evidence that they are superior to teacher-centred lessons.

Moreover, a learner-centred approach may be more appropriate for some tasks, or in smaller groups of under 8 in class. Learner-centred techniques, in their narrow definition, may be suitable in some circumstances, but it should never be assumed that they are automatically superior or even more suitable than teacher-centred ones (O'Neill, 1991, pp.303-304). So teachers should be able to judge and select which of the two approaches is most likely to yield fruitful results with a particular class at a particular time (ibid., p.299). They should never accept uncritically the claims made for any method (including the learner-centred) by those who promote them most enthusiastically (ibid., p.304).

Finally, the distinction between student-centredness and teacher-centredness, however, is often simplistic and misleading, "at best shallow and at worst specious and confusing" (O'Neill, 1991, p.293). Learning is often presented in a dualism of either student-centred learning or teacher-centred learning. But it is useful to see these as either end of a continuum, rather than as polar opposites (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005, p.29) (Figure 1).
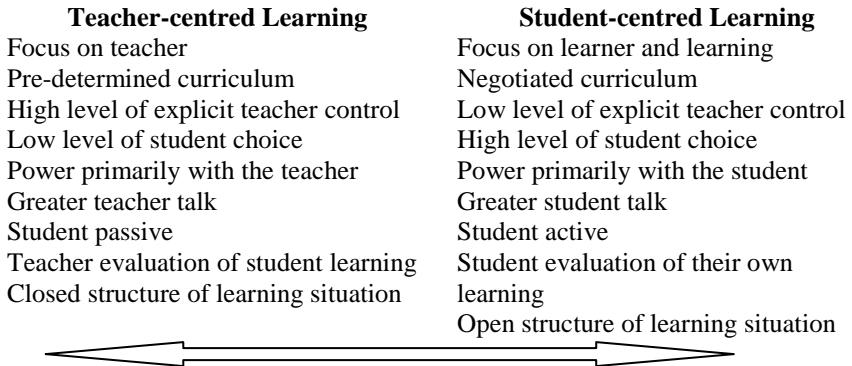
Teacher-centred Learning	Student-centred Learning
Focus on teacher	Focus on learner and learning
Pre-determined curriculum	Negotiated curriculum
High level of explicit teacher control	Low level of explicit teacher control
Low level of student choice	High level of student choice
Power primarily with the teacher	Power primarily with the student
Greater teacher talk	Greater student talk
Student passive	Student active
Teacher evaluation of student learning	Student evaluation of their own learning
Closed structure of learning situation	Open structure of learning situation

Figure 1: Teacher-centred – Student-centred Continuum

Conclusion

Although the term student-centred learning is used very commonly in the literature and in university policy statements, this has not necessarily transferred into practice because of the worries, fears and practical concerns that some teachers have. Student-centred teaching can provide a positive and effective learning experience for learners only if it is implemented well by teachers. Unfortunately, however, most teachers in any formal system of education are generally not aware of all the practical implications. As a result, they may claim to be adopting learner-centred methods in teaching English while in fact they may not wholly adopt them in practice. On the one hand, they may wish to be fashionable and try to hold the right opinion of the day; on the other, they may not have the right type of training required to adopt such practices fully (Al-Salami, 2010).

Moreover, the interpretation of the term appears to vary between active learning and a more comprehensive definition that includes active learning, choice in learning (content, activities, strategies, and assessment methods), and the shift of power and control in the teacher-student relationship. This may make teachers feel a sense of loss of control and authority in the classroom. Unless teachers are convinced that their role is only being redefined rather than diminished in learner-centred teaching, they may not put in the extra effort and adopt learner-centred practices whole-heartedly in their teaching.

There are also other issues, such as textbooks and teacher training, that need to be considered in this respect. For instance, we cannot be certain that the textbooks or course books used in various settings across the globe really help students construct knowledge on their own. We cannot also be certain whether a learner-centred approach is being adopted in teaching other subjects even when it is implemented for teaching English as a second or foreign language. Students may thus be exposed to widely differing instructional approaches and methods in different classes during the same period of study. To what extent are learners' own preferences with regard to learning styles and strategies being taken into account in all the practical situations?

Successful implementation of a learner-centred approach depends to a very large extent on teacher education, training and development i.e. preparing teachers in pre-service education, providing in-service training and promoting teacher development. Through these initiatives, teachers should be fully prepared to adopt a learner-centred approach, that is, have awareness and a thorough understanding of the approach and all the practical implications, including the ability to design appropriate materials and tasks for students, learning to use appropriate assessment methods and tools. Learners too should be provided learner training to benefit from such an approach. The challenge for higher education institutions in the Gulf countries, however, lies in accomplishing such a daunting task, especially in the context of the high turnover of faculty who come with different cultural, professional training and teaching backgrounds. Enormous teacher development initiatives are needed to address this concern.

The aim of this paper is not to question the theoretical soundness of learner-centredness or undermine the benefits that both learners and teachers would gain from adopting it, but only to sound a note of caution about believing in the exclusive excellence of any one approach or method, especially in educational practices. A lot of real classroom data, especially from the gulf context, is needed to demonstrate that the gap between theory and practice with regard to learner-centredness is indeed getting narrower, so that sincere and serious efforts can be made to move along the continuum towards learner-centredness. In the meantime, let us hope that another more appealing concept does not seek to replace learner-centredness. We may have to revisit the concept then.

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