Learner-Centered Instruction in Pre-Service Teacher Education: Does it Make a Real Difference in Learners' Language Performance?

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Abstract

The current study investigated the effect of implementing learner centered methodologies in a teacher education program. More specifically, it looked at the impact of exposing prospective teachers to learner centered methodologies through an EFL methods course. In turn, the effects of this approach on their school students' performance in English language skills (reading, writing, and speaking) were examined. The study used a quasi-experimental design where the performance of a group of school students using learner centered methodology (experimental group) was compared to the performance of another group of school students using non- learner centered approaches (control group). The study further examined whether significant differences existed between the performance of the two groups that can be attributed to gender and the school environment. Moreover, the study looked into students' attitudes towards language in a learner-centered environment. The instruments used in this study are the National test designed by the Ministry of Education and an attitude questionnaire that was adapted from the learner-centered methodology program document of the Ministry of Education. Major findings reveal significant differences in the performance of students in the two types of schools in favor of learner-centered schools. Despite the differences between the two groups on all measures, students' language performance of both learner centered and non-learner centered schools was found to be lower than the Ministry of Education specified minimum score.

Keywords: Learner-centered, Pre-service, Teacher education, Language performance

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning methods, approaches and techniques are constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of teachers and students alike. Thirst for improvement and attempts to keep pace with any new developments in the discipline have created a healthy competition among area specialists who constantly strive to avoid the dreaded sobriquet of *traditionalist*. This has resulted in a number of attempts to try out and implement a plethora of new methods and techniques with widely varying degrees of success. A good many of these attempts have fallen short of their terminal goals. Some educators who try to adopt new pedagogical approaches because they are current or fashionable and are often unable to voice their concerns due to their lack of expertise in applying these new ideas. This can and does sometimes lead to their being labeled backwards or less-than-proficient in their fields even by those who only claim to know it all. Moreover, even when these new trends are applicable and sound in nature, it is still questionable how much they contribute in any practical manner to student improvement. This is especially true if, at the end of the day, such newfangled approaches are sought after and applied for the sake of appearances and/or for the bolstering of one's reputation as a cutting-edge educator. Unfortunately, the field of English language teaching is not immune to this condition.

2. Theoretical Framework

In response to the need for school improvement, the ongoing research in education is focusing on exploring various approaches, methods, and techniques based on sound theoretical grounds. These methods of instruction, for the most part, cluster around either teacher-led or learner-centered (or student-centered) approaches. Learner-centered approaches in ELT take a number of forms though they are fundamentally similar in nature. They all stem from the notion of 'learning by doing' rather than being led by the teacher. The most prominent of these are active learning and service learning approaches. In the literature on teaching and learning, the term 'student-centered learning' is widely used (Young, 2000:72). Other terms used in the literature linked to this are 'experiential learning' (Burnard, 1999), 'flexible learning' (Taylor, 2000), and 'self-directed learning' (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005:27).

The concept of 'student-centered learning' is credited to Hayward in the beginning of the last century and to Dewey in the 1950s (O'Sullivan, 2003). Rogers (1983) expanded the concept of 'client-centered counseling' into a general theory of education to refer to a shift in power from the 'expert' teacher in a teacher-centered environment (where students are 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-centered education', which is derived from the work of Froebel (Simon, 1999).

A 'strand' emerged in the seventies with a focus on the learner "under the rubric of *individualized instruction* and more generally, *individualization*." This includes *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-centeredness*, 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" (Richards 2002, p. 15).

There does not seem to be a single theoretical basis for student-centered learning in the literature. It appears to relate primarily to the 'constructivist' view and the importance it places on *activity, discovery* and *independent learning* (Carlile and Jordan, 2005). While the cognitive theory emphasizes 'activity' in the learner's head (or the mind), the constructivist view emphasizes activities, such as projects and practicums in which students are required to engage themselves in some form of physical activity. The 'social-constructivist' view of learning also emphasizes activity and the importance of communities of practice in the learning process.

Research has empirically shown evidence for and against the use of learner centered approaches. Some studies such as Geisli, 2009; Ahmed and Mahmood, 2010; and Atara et al., 2000 show positive effects of student centered training approaches on students' achievements and the quality of learning. At the same time, other studies indicate there are complex factors such as learner and teacher characteristics that call into question the quick and simple implementation of these approaches and the concomitant positive effects of the same.

Geisli (2009) conducted a study to determine the effect of student centered training approaches on student success. A pre-/post-test experimental design was used with a control group and an experimental group. The tool for data collection was an achievement test developed by the researcher. The results showed that measured success was significantly higher in the group where student centered methods were applied compared to the teacher centered group.

Another study that showed a significant difference in students' achievement is that of Ahmed and Mahmood in (2010). They investigated the effects of three experimental learning conditions on prospective teachers' learning experience and achievement in an educational psychology course. These conditions include a traditional instruction model and two cooperative learning models. The subjects of the study were thirty-two student teachers enrolled in a master's degree program.

The results revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between prospective teachers' scores on learning experience measured across the three experimental conditions. The results also revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in achievement scores favoring both cooperative learning conditions. It was also reported that cooperative learning enhances perspective teachers' academic achievement as compared to traditional instruction. Further, it was reported that cooperative learning promoted an enriched, enjoyable and interactive learning experience. In addition to achievement, this study also provided evidence on the effect of learner centered approaches in the form of cooperative learning models on quality learning which is a focus of the study cited below.

Atara, et al. (2000) examined the effectiveness of active learning through the use of several learning activities implemented in two undergraduate programs at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The effectiveness of these activities was investigated using questionnaires and interviews to explore students' attitudes and approaches to learning. Results showed that the activities used helped provoke the development of independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge. They also affected the quality of student learning by shaping the way the students studied and meeting the desired learning outcomes.

Another study showed the positive effects of learner centered approaches on the quality of learning. Video documentaries were used to ask students to explore problems associated with farmers (Gravoso and Pasa 2008). The students' learning outcomes and experiences were compared to a group of students who studied the same topics in a teacher-centered learning environment. The level of understanding of the problems by the student-centered groups was found to be consistently higher than that of the teacher-centered groups. The results also showed that the learner-centered environment tended to engage students in knowledge construction, while the teacher-centered environment fostered the mere absorption of information. It was concluded that technology can change and improve the quality of learning outcomes if designed to support knowledge construction in a learner-centered environment.

From the above studies, there is some evidence of the usefulness of learner- centered approaches in student learning. However, there are other studies that reveal the complex side of implementing these approaches. Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, and Dochy (2008) focused on the relationships between experiences with portfolio assessment, students' approaches to learning and their assessment preferences. The method used for data collection was a pre- and post-test design in an authentic class setting using a questionnaire and an inventory to measure approaches to learning and assessment preferences inventory. The participants were 138 first-year undergraduate students who were assessed by means of portfolio assessment in a course that combined constructivist design principles and lectures.

The main results of the study were:

(a) students' preferences for student participation in examination and for permanent evaluation decreased significantly, (b) deep approaches were not enhanced, and (c) surface learning increased significantly; even though, the surface approach proved to be a significant negative predictor of the portfolio assessment score.

O'Sullivan (2003) conducted a case study, which explored the impact of learner-centered approaches on 145 unqualified primary teachers in Namibia where a learner-centered curriculum was introduced after its independence in 1990. The results of the study recommended that such an approach not be implemented. The researcher cited teacher professional capacity at the time of the study, limited resources, cultural factors and learner backgrounds as justification for this stance. Further, this study clarified some crucial issues. The researcher proposed the effectiveness of developing teachers' skills in the use of approaches, methods and skills which will bring about a great deal of learning. The study recommends considering the realities within which teachers work and experiment with strategies that seek to achieve student learning within the limitations of these realities..

Gijbels (2009) found out that students in a constructivist learning environment change their learning approaches towards a deeper approach and brought to light the effect that additional feedback had on the changes in learning approaches. Results showed that a deep approach is difficult to incite (see also Marton and Säljo 1997). The results also indicated that small changes in a learning environment do not necessarily lead to changes in students' approaches to their learning. The researcher provides an explanation based on the learning environment in which students might have perceived only the acquisition of facts and concepts as the learning process . Moreover, the assignments were considered solely an application of what was learned, and not a part of the learning process itself, which is similar to not perceiving an exam as part of the learning process.

Consequently, students might have reported only a part of their actual learning process. In addition, students' concepts of learning are difficult to change. Therefore, a seven-week course might not have been adequate in length. Furthermore, as the researcher points out that the instruments used in this research are best suited to investigating students' approaches to learning in "a traditional learning environment." As an example, the collaborative aspects of learning which were prominent in the learning environment used in this study form an essential part of these "new" learning environments. However, it is not certain that the instrument was capable of accurately grasping students' learning approaches in these environments. The researcher concludes by stating that "One cannot expect that the implementation of innovations will automatically result in positive changes. One has to be wary of how one implements new measures, how different innovations affect each other and how students perceive these measures" p (150)." It also requires the use of adequate instruments and adequate research methodology such as mixed-method research (Gijbels 2009).

Gijbels (2009)- in the study above- provides crucial factors that researchers should consider when trying to implement and evaluate student centered approaches. This study and the others presented here show that there are different factors that determine the positive or negative effects of these approaches. Some of these factors are: learners' perceptions and attitudes and their characteristics, length of time needed, the appropriate instruments used, how student centered approaches are implemented, teacher professional capacity, available resources, cultural factors and learner background.

3. Context of the Study

In an attempt to improve students' English language performance in Oman, the ministry of education embarked on a pilot project that converted 20 basic education schools into learner centered schools. The project was implemented in 2003 with funding and technical support from the US government's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Amendments to the curriculum, change in classroom environment and professional development of teachers were done to suit the learner centered philosophy. Preliminary evaluations conducted in 2006 indicated positive results. In turn, the experiment was expanded to cover more schools in the Sultanate.

In 2008 the Sultan Qaboos University teacher education program wanted to ensure that its graduates possessed necessary learner centered pedagogical skills to enable them to teach in learner centered environments. Methods courses which used traditional approaches were converted into learner centered courses and student teachers were invited to participate in sections where students were exposed to learner- centered classroom practices. This study intends to measure the impact of the learner-centered training of student teachers on learner performance in English language compared to the learner performance of those taught by student teachers with no exposure to learner centered pedagogy.

4. Purpose

The study aimed at examining the effect of learner-centered pre-service training on Basic Education learners' language performance. It investigated the difference in English language performance between learner- centered (experimental group) and non-learner- centered school students (control group). It also examined if differences existed between the experimental group and control group that could be attributed to gender and the school environment. Moreover, the study examined the experimental group's attitudes towards learning English.

5. Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Are there significant differences in English language performance between learner centered basic education school students and non-learner-centered basic education school students?

2. Is there a significant interaction effect on students' English language performance due to the type of school and students' gender?

3. Are there any significant differences in English language performance among learner-centered basic education school students which can be attributed to gender?

4. Are there any significant differences in English language performance among learner -centered basic education school students which can be attributed to the school environment?

5. How do all learner-centered and non-learner centered students in basic education schools perform in English language compared to the minimum required level of performance set by the Ministry of Education?

6. What is the learner centered basic education school students' attitudes towards learning English?

6. Method

6.1 Sample

Two learner centered schools and two non-learner centered schools were involved in this study. Student teachers who were involved in the learner centered training were placed in learner centered schools for their clinical work. Those who were not in the learner centered training were placed in one of the schools that were not part of the Ministry of Education learner centered project. A standardized English language test and an attitude survey were used for data collection. The total sample of school students tested was 189 of whom 114 were from leaner centered schools (4 classes) and 75 from the non-learner centered schools (3 classes).

6.2 Research Design

This is a quasi-experimental study using pre-post control group design to test the effect of learner centered methodology on students' English language performance and attitudes. In this quasi-experimental study, the control group received conventional instruction whereas the experimental group was exposed to learner centered instruction.

6.3 Research Tools

The instruments used in this study are the National test designed by the Ministry of Education which was confidential and an attitude questionnaire that was adapted from the Ministry of Education learner centered methodology program document. The questionnaire was translated in order to be used by grade 5 learners. The Arabic and the English versions of the questionnaire were checked for validity by area specialists and practitioners.

7. Results

Table 1. Mean of the students' scores in Different language Skills by Student in Learner centered Group and Non-learner Centered Group

Skill	Gender	Learner-centered students	Non-learner-centered students
Speaking	Male	35.19	25.34
	Female	36.04	30.26
	Total	35.64	27.83
Writing	Male	50.67	38.94
	Female	56.06	52.27
	Total	53.51	45.70
Reading	Male	42.78	38.78
	Female	51.92	46.05
	Total	47.59	42.47
Total	Male	42.88	34.36
	Female	48.01	42.87
	Total	45.58	38.67

Generally, table (1) shows that females outperformed their males counterparts in all language skills (speaking, X=36, writing, X=56, and reading, X=52). The next table (table 2) shows the significant differences between the relative groups.

Table 2. MANOVA of EFL students Language Performance

Dependent variable	Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Speaking	School Type	2758.081	1	2758.081	13.804	.000
	Gender	377.612	1	377.612	1.890	.171
	School Type * gender	187.008	1	187.008	.936	.335
Writing	School Type	2720.064	1	2720.064	6.030	.015
	Gender	3957.000	1	3957.000	8.773	.003
	School Type * gender	712.496	1	712.496	1.580	.210
Reading	School Type	1097.740	1	1097.740	2.389	.124
	Gender	3041.002	1	3041.002	6.617	.011
	School Type * gender	39.502	1	39.502	.086	.770
Total	School Type	2109.538	1	2109.538	9.649	.002
	Gender	2099.701	1	2099.701	9.604	.002
	School Type * gender	129.181	1	129.181	.591	.443

Table 2 above shows that the type of schooling is not affected by gender. There are no interaction effects between the type of school and gender on student performance in all language skills at the level of 0.05 (speaking p= 0.33, writing P= 0.21, reading = 0.77, total 0.444) However, the school type variable is significant in speaking, writing as well as the total (P= 0.00, P=0.015, P= 0.002), respectively. Further, gender is significant in writing and reading with totals of (P=0.003, P=0.01 and P=0.02) in favor of females. However, learner centered students' mean scores are slightly higher than their counterparts in non-learner centered schools.

Table 3. T-tests for Gender Differences in Leaner-centered Schools according to language skills

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speaking	Male	54	35.1852	15.93658	-.302	.764
	female	60	36.0417	14.38935		
Writing	Male	54	50.6734	26.61305	-1.199	.233
	Female	60	56.0606	21.26525		
Reading	Male	54	42.7778	22.62631	-2.241	.027
	Female	60	51.9167	20.91329		
Total	Male	54	42.8788	16.73494	-1.720	.088
	Female	60	48.0049	15.08248		

Table 3 above shows there is a significant difference in the performance among students in the learner-centered school in reading only at the 0.05 level (P=0.0.27) in favor of females. However, there are no significant differences between males and females mean scores in

general proficiency, speaking and writing at 0.05 level. However, despite the significant difference, it can be clearly observed that female EFL learners outperformed male EFL learners. The findings also reveal that, in general, when EFL learners are grouped according to gender, neither female nor male EFL learners obtained a score of fifty percent or more. However, female EFL learners scored slightly over fifty percent in writing and reading (X=56.06 and X=51.91 respectively). Males, on the other hand, obtained slightly above fifty percent in reading only (X= 50.67)

Table 4. T-tests of Learner-Centered school students' differences with regard to school environment

	School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speaking	Wahah	57	33.5526	12.31060	-1.650	.102
	Nobough	56	38.1696	17.09260		
Writing	Wahah	57	42.6635	24.56460	-5.447	.000
	Nobough	56	64.6916	17.82693		
Reading	Wahah	57	49.8246	19.77473	1.007	.316
	Nobough	56	45.6250	24.34716		
Total	Wahah	57	42.0120	15.65387	-2.543	.012
	Nobough	56	49.4954	15.63228		

Table 4 shows significant differences in EFL learners' language performance between Learner-centered basic education learners due to the school (place) in favor of Alnobough school at the 0.05 level of significance (P=0.012) with means of 49.50 for Alnobough and 42.01 for Alwahah. What contributed to this general significant difference between the schools is the learners scores in writing. That is, the results show significant differences in students' performance in speaking with Alnobough at the level of 0.001 and a mean of 64.70 for Alnobough while the Alwahah school had a mean of only 42.66. It is also worth noting that learners in Nobough school had a mean of just below fifty percent (X=49.495).

Table 5. One-sample t-test results for total group means on different skills compared to the Minimum required level

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speaking	189	32.5397	14.62173	.000
Writing	189	50.4089	21.92358	.798
Reading	189	45.5556	21.82701	.006
Total	189	42.8342	15.42161	.000

Table 5 shows that, overall, there is a significant difference between the total means of the students' language performance in different skills and the minimum required level (i.e. score) at the 0.01 level with a mean (X=42.8342 P=0.001). With regard to the specific language skills, the results reveal that there are significant differences between the means of students performance in speaking and reading at the 0.01 compared to the minimum required level with means (X=32.5397 and 45.555 , P=0.001 and 0.006 respectively). However, there is no

significant difference in students' performance in writing and the minimum level of performance.

Generally, the findings indicate that the students' performance did reach the minimum required level with various degrees of level and significance. The findings also reveal that the students performed better in writing than in reading or speaking. Speaking skill obtained the lowest mean of the three language skills being examined. This is probably because of the insufficient focus on speaking inside the classroom and no formal instruction in speaking in addition to lack of exposure for students to practice speaking outside the classroom.

Table 6. One-sample t-test results for comparing differences between means of Non-learner centered Basic Education students in English Language compared to the minimum required level

Skill	Sample	Mean	SD	Sig.
Speaking	75	27.8333	12.59647	0
Writing	75	45.697	17.45944	0.036
Reading	75	42.4667	21.13939	0.003
Total	75	38.6657	13.52642	0

Minimum required score = 50

With regard to the non-learner centered students, table 6 shows that there are significant differences between the means of the students' overall language performance and of the individual skill separately (speaking, writing, reading) and the minimum required level at the 0.01 level with the means(X=total 38.6657, speaking 27.8333, writing 45.6970, reading 42.4667, P=0.01). Generally, the findings indicate that the students' performance in general English and in the three skills was lower than the minimum required level prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

Table 7. One-sample t-test results for comparing differences between means of learner centered Basic Education students in English Language compared to the Minimum required level

Skill	N	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speaking	114	35.636	15.0802	0
Writing	114	53.5088	23.9917	0.121
Reading	114	47.5877	22.1243	0.247
Total	114	45.5767	16.023	0.004

As for the learner centered students, table 7 shows that there are significant differences between the means of the students' overall language performance and of the speaking skill separately and the minimum required level at the 0.01 level in favor of the minimum required level with the means (X=total 45.5767, speaking 35.6360 P=0.01). However, there were no significant differences in means of students' language performance in the skills of writing and reading and the minimum required level.

Generally, the findings revealed that that the students' overall language performance and

speaking ability were significantly lower than the minimum required level prescribed by the Ministry of Education. In the case of reading, the students performed lower than the minimum required level but was not significant. Student mean scores in writing, however, were higher, but were not significant compared to the minimum required level.

In General, the findings indicate that neither type of instruction (i.e. learner-centered nor non-learner centered) resulted in improved students' scores as measured by the Ministry of Education proficiency tests. All skills but one of those included in the study fell below the minimum required level prescribed by the MOE. This shows no remarkable gains in students' language improvement as a result of the teachers' exposure or non-exposure to learner centered methodologies. However, students' attitudes towards the learner centered approach seem to be telling a different story.

Table 8. Learner centered basic education school students' attitudes towards learning English (n=114)

Q. No.	Question	Mean	SD
19	Did you benefit from the learning resource centers?	96	.185
1	Did you enjoy learning English in school?	96	.206
16	Do you like the learning resource centers?	93	.257
17	Do you like the learning center activities?	92	.271
5	Did you learn how to read?	89	.308
9	Does your teacher ask you questions?	89	.319
20	Do you benefit from learning center activities in the classroom?	89	.319
3	Do you find the English school books and materials interesting?	89	.394
18	Do you benefit from the information and programs presented in the morning meetings?	88	.330
2	Do you like the classroom activities?	88	.330
15	Do you like the information and programs presented in the morning meetings?	87	.340
6	Do you like reading?	87	.340
12	Does your mother or father help you when you need/do not understand something?	.85	.358
10	Does your teacher allow you to ask questions in class?	85	.358
13	Do you have any role in the classroom? Do you have a job in the classroom?	83	.397
11	Do your classmates help you when you need/do not understand?	83	.374
14	Does your mother or father come to school to ask about you?	78	.416
4	Do you sometimes take your books and materials home?	75	.432
8	Do you have anything / any work on the classroom wall?	52	.502
7	Did you write a story?	35	.479
Overall		**82.9375**	**.46682**
		(3.3175)	

It is clearly observed from the results in table 8 that students have generally high positive attitudes towards learner centered approach. The means of sixteen out of twenty items are above 80. The means of the remaining four items range between 78 and 35. Only one item

obtained a mean of less than 50 (X=35). The reason could be that grade 4 students are not exposed to writing stories at this level.

Though not reaching high levels of performance, these findings suggest that learner centered methodology does not only lead to significantly better performance than students taught by teachers who were not exposed to learner centered methodology but it also develops positive attitudes towards the learner centered approach and English language learning in general.

8. Summary of Results and Conclusions

The following is a summary of the main findings and conclusions:

- Significant differences were found between the performance of students in learner centered schools compared to those in schools using non learner centered approach, in favor of the learner centered schools.

- Significant differences were found within the learner centered schools which can be attributed to the school environment.

- No significant differences were found that could be attributed to gender.

- Weak language performance was seen in both learner centered and non-learner centered groups.

- The attitude questionnaire administered to learner centered students indicated they had positive attitude towards learning English.

The current study shows some evidence that supports the use of learner centered methodology which is similar to various previous studies (Atara et al 200; Geisli, 2009; and Ahmed and Mahmood, 2010) that revealed positive effects of student-centered approaches on students' achievement. However, the current study did not reveal significant differences between the two groups (control and experimental) in students' language improvement in all language skills. It is, therefore, still not that clear how much this methodology can contribute to learners' language improvement in general. This is supported by studies that showed the complex side of implementing this methodology (Gijbels, 2009; Baeten at el, 2008, and O'Sullivan, 2003).

In order to see the actual effect of the learner-centered approach on pre-service teacher education project, concrete evidence from students' school performance is necessary. This is the only way that clearer and more solid evidence can be collected to show the success of the approach. This study went beyond looking into the effect of the project on the student teacher. Rather, it looked at the multiple effects of the learner-centered methodology on the school students' language performance as compared with another traditional instructional approach commonly used in Oman. Teachers and curriculum developers will benefit from the findings of this study in improving teaching and curriculum development in Oman.

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