

The Possibility of Applying a Real Student-centered Method in EFL Classes English Department, Cihan University

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Abstract—The present research examined the possibility of applying a real student-centered method in EFL classes of the English Department at Cihan University-Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq. To this end, a descriptive qualitative research design was used to do this study. Six lectures with different levels and also different subjects were observed in the English Department of Cihan University. Some interviews were done with the lecturers and students before and after the lectures randomly to get some point from their views toward this novel method which is the student-centered learning. The obtained data revealed that implementing a pure student-centered lecture is impossible and the lecturer needs to apply a kind of eclectic method which is the mixture of student-centered and teacher-centered methods in such EFL classrooms.

Keywords—EFL class, Learning, Student-centered method, Teacher-centered method, Teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the novel teaching methods have received increased attention in recent years, fresh research on student-centered method in EFL classes can provide many contributions to the task of teaching and learning. There are lots of terms which are used for student-centered learning (SCL) in different studies. Some of these terms are *flexible learning* (Taylor, 2000), *experiential learning* (Burnard, 1999), and self-directed learning. According to Kember (1997), there are two major attitudes in teaching which are the teacher-centered/content-oriented approach and the student-centered/learning-oriented one.

Active learning or student-centered learning is a kind of learning approach in which the students can choose the materials that they want to study, even the way and reasons of learning that special topic that they are interested in. Strictly speaking, the learning responsibility and the activities are all on the learner not the instructor. If the teaching subjects are more related to their actual lives and interest, it may be more interesting and understandable for them.

Nowadays, science is evolving at such a rapid pace that we may not be able to keep up to pass it on to our students, so we must teach them to fish rather than give them fish that is the teachers need to teach them the way of learning to make them autonomous and learn whatever they want at any time.

The students should learn how to achieve new knowledge by themselves. There are lots of methods that can make the students active in class and make the class interesting for them and at the same time help them to achieve the required knowledge.

The purpose of such methods is motivating the students to educate and increasing the sense of cooperation and mutual understanding among them. This has been the case for quite some time, it is emphasized on the role of the teacher as the teaching and learning facilitator. Nevertheless, it is better for the learner to deal with the subject by participating in the activities and learning process to acquire it by himself. In this way, he has a role in this learning procedure and it will be kept in his mind more.

In a learner-centered class, the emphasis is on each student's unique requirements. This method necessitates the participation of both the teacher and the student. They should each have their own part to play. In such a class, the teacher can be the data collector, controller, and activator, as well as a meditative practitioner and researcher in such a class. On the other hand, the students are in charge of their own education. As a result, they should try to join in the talks and interact actively with one another while also acting as their own checkers.

Student-centered approach is used in English Department at Cihan University and the teachers provide the needed environment for the students to be active in class and learn. In most circumstances, the teacher is just the controller. However, most studies show that using such a strategy has not made a significant difference in the outcome. Only a small number of students could get a satisfying mark with implementing this method.

According to some evidence from observations and questionnaires that were done by the researcher in Cihan University-English Department, the most of the English teachers could not engage the students actively. The most of the students were silent or they only answered whenever the teacher called them. This situation proves that there are some problems in implementing a real learner-centered approach. It is good to know that a learner-centered class focuses more on the learning process rather than the materials. The students should acquire the metacognitive skills to use them in any kind of learning environment. By each new educational method, they may learn better and have the chance of finding their learning method. In this method, the student is not supposed as a passive container to be filled with the teacher's knowledge, on the contrary, he can be part of the teaching process that may be helpful for his classmates as well.

According to the observations that the researcher had done, it was clear that the learner-based classroom is placed on the more organized intellectual skills such as the ability to judge or evaluate. The students who learn these skills completely will receive and acquire the new information better and faster, they can also apply it in different situations. In addition to creating a strong data base in their mind, they can cultivate the learning and self-awareness skills in themselves. Since the students have to make decisions along with the teacher, they should be careful about finding a better way to learn and at the same time, they are required to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses to follow them.

With all these in mind, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the lecturer apprehend the learner-centered approach to implement it well?
2. What are the challenges that prevent the correct implementation of the student-centered approach?
3. How well can the EFL learner can get benefit from a class with a learner-centered approach?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student-centered approach is rooted in constructivist theory, by which the students need to experience rather than only listen or look. Brown (2008) assumes the students as the architects of their own education rather than only being like statues in class who listen to the only speaker that is the teacher. According to *Jacobs* and *Renandya* (2016), this learner-centered approach originates from four learning philosophies which are progressive education, humanistic psychology, constructivism, and sociocultural theory. Based

on these theories, when the students can produce the content by themselves, their learning will develop more due to fostering their inventiveness and autonomous learning.

There are lots of reasons for the EFL teacher to choose this approach: To engage students more (Kelly, 1985), to make students more self-assured (Dandoulakis, 1986), to promote their mental development (Bruke, 1983), to provide a chance of making historical views (Ogawa, 2001), to strengthen their comprehension of historical ideas and viewpoints (Stout, 2004), and to transfer the learning task to students (Passman, 2000), etc.

In this novel strategy, the inventors of the learning procedure are the university and every lecturer then they need to control in a way that they can continue it as a student-centered process. The lecturers need to abandon the continuous control to create a self-sufficient environment for learning and it is achieved by trusting the students. Dewey (1916) and Piaget (1977) are two theorists who believe in liability of learners to educate themselves. Transferring this role from the lecturer to the students requires some specific provisions such as a fair distribution of power, operation of content, lecturer's role, accountability of learning, and the assessment method (Schiller, 2009, p.370). On the other hand, Nunan (1999) believes that making an active learning requires learners' ideas about the teaching materials and also the most suitable ways to do it.

Dewey defined critical thinking from a philosophical standpoint. He describes learning environment as a growing place for mind treatment and practice (Dewey, 1993). If this leaning happens in an interactive way, critical thinking is established as well. Olsen and Kagan (1992) consider critical thinking as an inseparable part of language skills. Hence, if one could find such environment, an effective acting would be the result. Getting advantage of a teaching and learning process needs a kind of attentive learning and effective teaching in the shadow of critical thinking skills. In such educational environment, the students can find better chances of involvement and they feel more precious at the same time. If all the requirements are provided completely, you can find a cooperative learning along the critical thinking.

This approach was invented in the 1990s for the 1st time and many language instructors have tried and reflected on it. As its name shows, the instructors try to make that environment for the students to be active and they act as their facilitator. This is completely different from the traditional approach that we all know, teacher-centered one that we all know.

Two researchers (Gholami and Ziafar, 2015) in a study considered two teaching methods, the presentation-practice-production method, and the observe-hypothesize-experiment method to decrease the practical problems among female intermediate EFL learners of English as a foreign language in an Iranian language center. According to their study, those two mentioned methods were useful to diminish the pragmatic failure among these students. It should be noted that the observe-hypothesize-experiment method was more effective.

Zohrabi et al. (2012) did a research study on teacher-centered and learner-centered learning methods. They tried

both methods to teach English grammar to Iranian EFL learners in a high school context. Based on their attained result, the teacher-based one worked better for them to teach the grammatical points.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The study was conducted in the Department of English language in Cihan University-Erbil, where all courses are taught in English. Six random lectures were observed, 45 students and six lecturers were chosen randomly to participate in the present study to be interviewed and fill in the questionnaires.

B. Data Collection

A descriptive and qualitative research design was used to do this study to find the answers for the research questions. Six times teaching were observed that the teaching time was about 50 min. The principles of the used learner-based method were taken from Schiller (2009) framework. Two out of those six teachers were informed before the class to use this approach at that special session of observation to compare to those classes which were teacher-centered. For example, the teachers tried to cooperate closely with the student to convey their message.

During the observation sessions, some notes were taken to have an accurate analysis. For the students' interview, five of them from each class were chosen randomly to answer the questions regarding to this approach and different reactions and feedback were received from them. A part of the data were collected through a questionnaire (Appendix) which containedquestions. Respondents were required to mark their responses on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5) and from "extremely" (1) to "not at all" (5), depending on the type of question.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the gained information from the observations and interviews, learner-centered method could help the students to take the control of the class in their hands during the oral activities and discussions. It could be seen well that the teacher could distribute the power of participation among them in a nice way. One of the interesting observed things was about informing the students by one of the teachers about the upcoming materials that they were going to learn during the next 45 min. The titles of some topics and the possible activities were introduced. Giving this beforehand information can be troublesome in some cases because you cannot convince all the students to agree on all suggested topics and tasks.

By comparing this approach with the traditional teacher-based one, it would be clear that each of them has its own advantages and disadvantages but for EFL learning the learner-base one works more. Lots of other studies came to this conclusion that the learner-centered approach affects

learning positively; like Gravoso and Pasa (2008) or Geisli (2009) who achieved the same results. In a student-centered class, the learners try to create the knowledge but in a teacher-based one, they only get it from the instructor.

Meanwhile, the obtained results of this research are not compatible with Khuvasanond (2013) who studied the three various methods to teach vocabulary to EFL learners in his Ph.D. thesis. According to his conclusion, the ones who received the instructor-based method got a better outcome than those who learned by a student-centered approach.

According to the achieved results, the Kurdish students in Cihan University need to improve their competence due to its importance for their future language practice. On the other hand, they are required to strengthen their speaking skill to communicate better and construct the knowledge by themselves.

Some strategies were observed or suggested by the lecturers in the interviews to increase the usage of a student-centered approach in class. Some of them are like group discussions, Buzz groups, debates, role-play, student class presentations, and field trips. Such activities engage the students more to be active during the teaching hours.

The teachers' apprehension of student-centered approach is related to their background knowledge. Lots of positive feedbacks were received about the student-centered approach due to its effectiveness in EFL teaching. Unfortunately, the most of the teachers had the same idea that the majority of the students are inactive and they need to be involved individually by calling their names. It may be because of their low level of English proficiency and competence. Table 1 reports some information about the teachers' apprehension on student-based method.

The students did not have much information about the SC approach and it was used practically more rather than explaining about it theoretically. Although the most of the teachers were eager to use this novel approach, they were confronted with lots of challenges. One of the teachers believed that the students are not confident enough to use their English in class.

One of the teachers believed that by a correct implementation of this approach, the teacher is autonomous in controlling his class and it helps him to plan better for his lecture and evaluate their learning process more effectively. This way of teaching needs a creative lecturer to attain the best result from the learning process. In his opinion, the students can show off their English proficiency even if their level is weak.

Based on the received results of this study, student-centered approach turned out to be more efficacious than the traditional teacher-based teaching methods. It can motivate the learners and make a kind of independent student who is less anxious and stressed during the learning process. When the learners find themselves as active members of the class, they can get rid of their weakening stress and try to participate in different learning activities, that is, in pairs, small groups, and individually. This participation gives a feeling of success to them and this is the cause of their anxiety reduction. Regarding this aspect, Bandura (1997) believes that "Success

TABLE 1
TEACHERS' APPREHENSION ON STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

No.	Item	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
1	Students proficiency level	Basic	Intermediate	Basic	Basic	Intermediate	Basic
2	Students engagement	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
3	Comprehension of SC method	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
4	Background information about SC method	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
5	Implementing SC approach	No	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No

rebuilds a robust belief in one's personal efficacy and failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established."

Worth mentioning here that it is so important to choose a suitable activity for the students to participate in and this is the creative teacher's art to know his students interests and deficiencies and motivate them to engage in that task. In this way, the learners find that language learning does not need any extraordinary skill. The vivid atmosphere of class by this method gives the students an opportunity to put their opinions into words. English department students need to be able to communicate to improve their speaking skill but unfortunately in most of the observed classrooms the teachers talked more and the students were still inactive. This is the teachers' responsibility to manage the time and specify enough time for the students to show off their speaking proficiency.

The achieved information and results of the present study are in congruence with some other previous studies. Student-centered approach improved 120 Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension (Lak et al., 2017). According to Alrabai and Moskovsky (2016), five impressive items such as motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, and autonomy accounted for between 85% and 91% of variance in Saudi university EFL students' performance. The three abilities that need to be improved in those EFL learners are listening, oral communication, and expressing themselves.

It is clear that the appearance of such approach rooted in this belief that we should not suppose students as passive subjects, but rather they share the learning responsibility with their teacher and classmates. After observing some of the lectures that were managed by this method, it is clear that there is a power harmony among the teacher and the learners to make a fair atmosphere of learning because the focus of this learning approach is on the outcome and it is a good chance to involve all the students in the learning process.

All in all, a successful implementation of the student-centered approach is heavily dependent on the way that the lecturer and the learners play their roles in class. Their performances are interrelated to each other. Although there are so many problems and challenges, they are controllable. Hence, they need to collaborate with each other to achieve the most fruitful outcomes.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to check the possibility of a real implementation of student-centered EFL classroom

in English Department of Cihan University in Erbil-Kurdistan/Iraq. The results proved that it is an effective method as it gives the opportunity of communication to students but unfortunately due to the lack of enough English language proficiency by the majority of students, it did not work in English Department at Cihan University.

Although the students and the teachers were very keen on following this approach, in practice, they had to switch it into the traditional teacher base teaching and learning to cover the required materials. In the real implementation of this approach, the learners are the main controller of the learning process and the lecturer is considered as a facilitator for them. They need to collaborate to achieve their goal.

Another main obstacles for implementing this approach were the shortage of lecture time which was only 50 min. During this short time, the teachers could not manage it to leave the stage for the students to control the learning process by themselves. The other problem that was observed was the large number of students and their sitting pattern which was the traditional sitting pattern, it was not possible to engage all of them to participate in the discussions.

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APPENDIX

Student-centered Classroom Questionnaire

(Please note: This is only a list of questions that is prepared by the author based on personal opinion, experience, and research)

Please read each point carefully and choose the appropriate answer.

No	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	The lecturer respects the students' opinions					
2	The lecturer treats all students equally					
3	The lecturer does not comment negatively on students ideas					
4	The lecturer gives enough time to the students to discuss					
5	The lecturer specifies extra time with students for their learning difficulties					
6	The lecturer has energy and eagerness for all activities					
7	The lecturer offers enough guidance to the students for their group tasks					
8	The lecturer tries to make the class fun by giving interesting examples or ...					
9	The lecturer cares about the shy and inactive students					
10	The lecturer tries to direct the students to the correct way of learning					

Scoring all statements	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	1	2	3	4	5

Check your scores:

- 10–20 - You need to improve your approach toward students. As a teacher, you need to show more concern in the well-being of the students. With little more effort, you can be a “student-centered” approach teacher
- 21–35 - You have moderate level of “student-centered” approach. You need to identify areas for improvement for being more approachable to students
- 36–45 - You are doing well as a “student-centered” teacher. You will be quite successful with students and be their favorite teacher. Try to be more effective by addressing few weak areas
- 45–50 - You have excellent “student-centered” approach towards students. You will be a result-oriented teacher, admired, and respected by your students. Keep up the good spirit.