Integrating an Intrinsic Strategy in Higher Education: Learner-Centered Approach in Language Teaching

A B S T R A C T

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The aim of the current study is to draw attention to the limitations of the teacher-centered strategy in language teaching. The study investigates the dominant teaching strategies in higher education. A qualitative case study is used to collect data in the form of classroom observations, interviews and field notes. The results emerged from this study illustrates the need to re-think and re-form the traditional teaching practices in language teaching

A R T I C L E   I N F O

دمج إستراتيجية جوهرية في التعليم العالي:التركيز على المتعلم في تدريس اللغة

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الخلاصة:

إن الهدف من الدراسة الحالية هو لفت الانتباه إلى قصور طريقة اعتبار الأستاذ هو المحور في تدريس اللغة. تبحث الدراسة في استراتيجيات التدريس المهيمنة في تدريس اللغة. اتبعت الدراسة المنهج النوعي لدراسة حالة- تم جمع البيانات عبر المشاهدات الصفية المقابلات والملاحظات الحقلية. أظهرت النتائج التي توصلت لها هذه الدراسة أن هناك حاجة إلى إعادة التفكير وإعادة تشكيل ممارسات التدريس التقليدية.

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I. Introduction

EDUCATION is considered a basic human right; it plays a significant role in the development of children, communities and countries. Providing educational opportunities for all will lead to reach all developmental goals such as supporting gender empowerment, improving child health and maternal health, reducing hunger, fighting the spread of HIV and diseases of poverty, spurring economic growth and building peace (UNFPA 2005:2) . A successful higher education must fulfill several goals. Firstly, it must provide a sufficient training to enable its citizens to build a modern society and to be part of its development. Secondly, the society's problems and appropriate solutions can be determined offering a strong setting. Thirdly, it must provide a strong medium for studying and developing the society's culture and values (ibid). Education can be related to economic and social benefits. The economic benefits can be related to a higher level of self-esteem, self-direction and better life decisions (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis 2008:8).

There has been a repeated emphasis on the importance of the importance of education in Islam. This was clearly indicated to the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) in the first verse of the Qur'an, which started with the word "Iqr'a". It included a command to read. This Arabic word has many implications for "learning", "exploring" and "seeking enlightenment" (Muborakshoeva 2012:32). Human development is presented in Islam in a holistic view. Knowledge and education is considered central in Islam because of its great benefits for humanity. Education is based on basic principles of justice, equality and equity (ibid:32).

II. Research Questions

1. What are the main language teaching methods in higher education in Iraq?

2. What are the lecturers' reasons for using the teacher-centered strategy in language teaching?

III. Literature Review

A. The Teacher -Centered Approach

The dominant model of teaching in universities is the "transmission" model. In this model, the knowledge is transmitted by the instructor. In the learner-centered strategy, the focus is placed on the student rather than the instructor. This strategy relies mainly on "deep learning" instead of content delivery, memorization and regurgitation (Mintz 2010:11). Two main elements must be taken into account in learner-centered classrooms. Firstly, students must be

given more responsibility to handle their learning. Secondly, teachers are not considered the source of knowledge. They are facilitators of knowledge; their role is to help learners learn how to learn (Nonkukhetkhong 2006:20).

B. The Learner -Centered Approach

The main goal of teaching is to promote learning. Teachers cannot be considered now to work "as exclusive content expert or authoritarian classroom managers" (Weimer 2002). The role of the teacher is different; s/he must be around the classroom rather than in front of it. In the learner-centered strategy, the teacher plays a significant role in creating a new kind of learner. According to Boud (1981:41), the target of education is to create a learner with a new personality. Traditional education creates dependent learners who are fully depending on their teacher to acquire knowledge. The new strategies in teaching in which the learner is the center of the teaching lead to building a new kind of learner; a learner who is independent, autonomous and takes the responsibility of his learning (ibid:41). This concept appeared to create active learning, self-directed learning and autonomous learning (Pillay 2002:94).

Implementing the learner-centered strategy does not mean losing the power of the teacher. In this strategy, power is shared between the learner and the teacher. According to many educators, this leads to ethical consequences because it violates the teacher's legitimate power. However, sharing powers between the teacher and the students does not mean giving full power for students. This strategy relies mainly on the concept of power redistribution. Students are given portions of power in a gradual process; students are given the chance to present their input and present some recommendations. This will create energy and enthusiasm inside classrooms. Ultimately, teachers will benefit from this; they will not suffer from "passive and disconnected students" (Weimer 2002:23).

Weimer (ibid) suggested five learner-centered changes to be applied in the teaching practices in order to reach the best learning outcomes. The five learner-centered changes to teaching practices "Challenge long-held assumptions and traditional ways of thinking about instructional roles and responsibilities". The five learner-centered teaching practices include, as demonstrated in Figure 2: the balance of power, the function of content, the role of the teacher, responsibility for learning and process and purpose of evaluations. In the first learner-centered change to teaching practice, the balance of power, the classroom turns to be a democratic environment because the teachers are no longer authoritarian. The students' understanding is challenged because they have role in shaping the course assignments, assessments and evaluations; their inputs are valued (ibid:30).

In the second learner-centered change to teaching, the function of content, the concentration is on the tension between content quantity and content quality. Though in higher education the professor is not able to pick and choose the course content, s/he can have a certain concept and ideology in the teaching process. By having a new view on the function of the content, they can change the role of the professor. This new view can enhance motivation and learning (ibid:47). In the third learner-centered change, the role of the teacher, the new move is done by the professors in involving their students in the teaching process. The professor must try to engage the students actively by preparing discussion topics, games, case studies and group activities (ibid:73).

In the fourth learner-centered change, the responsibility for learning, the responsibility for knowledge acquisition and learning is shared between the professor and the students. Both parties must collaborate to meet the course expectations (ibid:97). In the last learner-centered change, process and purpose of evaluations, the tests and assignments are used to facilitate learning. Tests are important measures of learning; however, students must understand that learning does not end with completing tests. The importance of tests and assignments lies in promoting learning not merely in assigning grades (ibid:121).
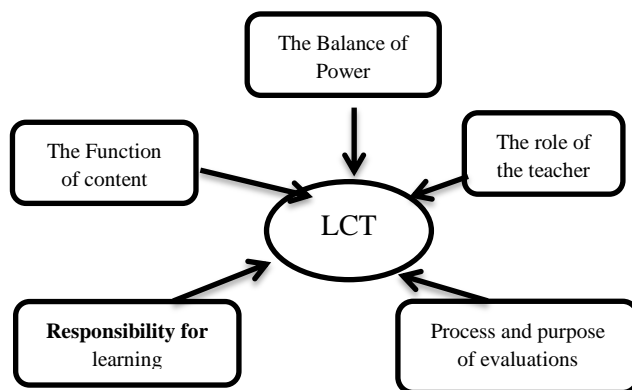

Figure I The five learner-centered changes (Weimer 2002)

C. Conceptual Framework

Mubita (1998:3) presented a conceptual framework that is based on learner-centered teacher education. This framework focuses on the teacher in the classroom, students/learners, the curriculum and the community. The community plays a significant role in the education of children. The role of

parents, schools, teachers and learners must be unified to reach a new step in the educational development. This framework concentrates on the role of parents in educating their children; parents are considered teachers because can co-teach with the teachers. The current paper attempts to provide an adaptation for this existing framework to connect it with the aim of the paper of implementing the learner-centered strategy in language teaching.
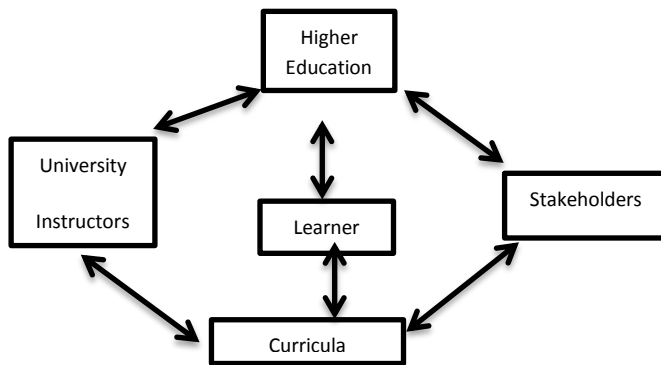

Figure II Conceptual Framework (Mubita 1998)

IV. Methodology

A. A Qualitative Case Study

This Study is a qualitative case study. Lincoln & Guba (1985:47) mentioned that the qualitative design can picture the empirical social world of classroom teaching practices. It allows the researcher to conduct the study in a natural setting to collect the needed data. It gives close, direct and personal contact with the participants of the study in their environment. The main activity in qualitative methods is fieldwork that allows the researcher to get close to the participants and understand the realities of their daily life (Patton 2002:38; Creswell 1998:42; Creswell 2014:13). In this study, the naturalistic data was collected in the form of observations, field notes and semi and open-ended responses by the participants during the interviews.

Because the researcher needs to get an in-depth understanding of the participants and their contexts, a case study was applied with only three participants. According to Stake (2008:125), a case with few participants can provide better bases for understanding the contexts.

B. Participants

The participants in this study are three instructors from different faculties in the university of Basra-Iraq. They were chosen randomly to participate in the study. Several steps were taken in order to take the permission to commence the study. The names of all the participants have been changed; pseudonyms were used in the study. To give full information of the participants, background information will be provided in following table:

Table I. Participants' Background Information

Name	Field	Level of Education	Graduation Faculty
Anna	English	Master degree (M.A.)	Faculty of Arts
Rebecca	English	Doctorate degree (PhD)	Faculty of Arts
Suzan	English	Doctorate degree (PhD)	Faculty of Education

V. Results

According to the observed data in Anna's classrooms, who is teaching in department of English, the dominant strategy in her teaching is teacher-centered strategy. The dominant role in Anna's teaching is done by her. She dominates the lectures from the first minute until the end of the lecture. The students listen to her explanation silently. It is obvious that she is doing the active role during the lecture. The students have an active role merely in answering the exercises.

During the lectures of Rebecca, who is teaching in the department of English, the teaching strategy is teacher-centered strategy. She lectures on a certain topic while her students listen. The observations showed that the active role of the students is seen only in discussing their homework exercises.

The classroom observations showed that Suzan's lectures, who is teaching in the department of English, is based on the teacher-centered strategy. The whole effort in teaching is done by the teacher. Though studying English implies practical teaching, the theoretical part is done wholly by the lecturer. The students play a passive role; they can be seen active merely in applying the exercises. This was the answer of the first research question.

In the interviews, Anna mentioned, "Since my graduation, one of my ambitions is to follow my teachers. I used the same style to reach the same results that our teachers reached with us. I believe that following my teachers' methods will be very useful in my teaching. We need to focus on explaining the theoretical topics for students; this is best done by the teacher. The practical part can be done by the students in doing the exercises".

Rebecca states, in her interview, "Our teaching method is the best method in teaching. The learning material must be transmitted mainly by the teacher. The adequate source of information is the teacher. I believe that students must be trained to be a good listener. This is because the teacher is highly qualified with information to be able to deliver it to the students".

During her interview, Suzan mentioned, "I need to focus on the ability of my students. I need to improve their knowledge. Our teaching process is based mainly on improving our students' abilities'; their degree of information can be

increased by gaining information from the teacher. They lack the capacity to get knowledge by themselves; they need to rely on their teachers. This process can lead to increasing the students' input". The interviews led to the answer of the second research question.

VI. Discussion

Firstly, there is an urgent need to develop an understanding of the traditional teaching. It is obvious that there is a strong tendency to follow the traditional teaching. New patterns and methods of teaching must be presented to the instructors. The results of the study have shown that the teaching practices are traditional because of the instructors' strong belief in its effectiveness. This belief can be shifted to a new concept by comparing it with the new instructional practices that can show its great impact on the students' learning. This finding is congruous with what was emphasized by Nunan (2002: 135) and Hedge (2000: 77) who stressed on the importance of providing new efficient learning strategies that can shift from the traditional methods.

Secondly, the results have shown that the instructors believe that the teacher is the source of information. The teacher is knowledgeable to transmit his information to the students. This leads to link this belief with the concept of "banking" that was presented by Friere (1970:45) in his pedagogy of the oppressed. This concept can be seen clearly in the teaching methods of the participants. The teacher plays the main role as the banker and their students act as safe deposits. The students have a total passive role; they are in classrooms to receive, repeat and memorize what was delivered to them by their teachers.

Thirdly, the results of the study have indicated that there is a reluctant belief in the students' abilities. Due to this belief, students are not integrated in the teaching process. Unfortunately, educators have created a systematic belief that alienates all the students' abilities in learning. It is clear that this belief is inhabited in the educators' minds. This belief is creating a learning barrier that keeps students as receivers.

The first step in transforming this belief is by creating a new understanding for the students' abilities; take a step in engaging the students with new learning opportunities in which they take an active role. This will lead to fostering the students' engagement in learning. This can be done as a trial to improve the educators' perceptions about their abilities.

Finally, the students are disengaged from taking active role in learning because of conventional beliefs on classroom practices. There is a need to take step in investing the students' minds by giving them the opportunity to get involved in the teaching practices.

VII. Conclusion

A. There is an urgent need to build well-qualified committed teachers. Teachers must be provided with proper education to become up-to-date with all the new strategies in teaching.

B. Our students must be prepared for facing all the global challenges. This can be done by building a new personality. To reach this goal, there is a need to improve the students' understanding about learning to think about it as more than just traditional classroom to receive information.

C. Creating fully autonomous students must be a goal that we must pursue incrementally. Considerable hurdles remain that must be overcomed to reach a difference in the value of the whole teaching practices. This transformation is critical for the future of the education system.

D. Implementing the learner-centered strategy is a journey that leads to a total society progression. All educationists need to respond to this new change by altering the traditional teaching behaviors. This in turn will generate wider educational benefits.

E. There are many factors that can limit or slow down the process in countries. The most important factor is the educational system; the basic challenge is in planning and implementing new strategies in education. There is a need for a tailored programming to incorporate a new shift in education. Higher education all over the world is in a dynamic state; educationists can have a genuine opportunity to influence the future of education. This can be done by creating new opportunities for students to achieve their potential in new educational environments.

F. With this paper, it is hoped that shedding light on the student-centered strategy will have a positive effect in encouraging the planning and implementation of new strategies in language teaching. This paper is vital as it has the potential to benefit the whole educational system.

VIII. Recommendations For Future Research

In general, there is a need for research that considers the implementation of new strategies to support the development in the educational system. This paper has demonstrated the significance of building a new belief in language teaching practices. However, further research in this field can generate a significant body of knowledge.

Since much of this work is still at an early stage, further researches are needed to be studied and applied in all the educational stages -starting from the primary stages in schools till the higher education in universities. There is a need to

demonstrate a systematic understanding of the new strategies in teaching; this can be done by conceiving, designing and adapting a substantial process of research.

Educationists and curricula developers should generate novel researches that can nurture the new generation to develop the students' autonomy. New studies can serve to assist in developing all the educational institutions; these studies can be seen as vehicles through which new educational culture can be built.

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