Learner-centered instruction: An approach to develop the speaking skill in English

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is experiencing important changes with the aim of moving from the traditional methodologies and attaining better learning outcomes. This study is intended to analyze the effect of learner-centered instruction on the development of the speaking skill in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. In order to do this research, google scholar, Harzing´s publish or perish, scopus, ScienceDirect, books and other academic journals were explored. As a result of this search, more than 900 papers were found. This information served to interrelate learner-centered principles to the development of the speaking skill so that learners can communicate in English in various contexts worldwide. From the analysis, it was concluded that learner-centered instruction was an approach that developed the speaking skill through the realization of meaningful and authentic tasks.

Keywords: learner-centered instruction, English speaking skill, tasks

Instrucción centrada en el estudiante: un enfoque para desarrollar la destreza oral en el idioma Inglés

RESUMEN

La educación superior está experimentando cambios importantes con el objetivo de pasar de las metodologías tradicionales y lograr mejores resultados de aprendizaje. Este estudio pretende analizar el efecto de la instrucción centrada en el alumno en el desarrollo de la habilidad de hablar en el salón de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL). Para hacer esta investigación, google scholar, Harzing's publicar o perecer, scopus, ScienceDirect y otras revistas académicas fueron explorados. Como resultado de esta búsqueda, se encontraron más de 900 documentos. Esta información sirvió para relacionar los principios centrados en el estudiante con el desarrollo de la expresión oral para que los estudiantes puedan comunicarse en inglés en varios contextos a nivel mundial. Del análisis, se concluyó que la instrucción centrada en el estudiante era un enfoque que desarrollaba la expresión oral a través de la realización de tareas significativas y auténticas.

Palabras claves: Instrucción centrada en el estudiante, expresión oral en inglés, tareas

1. INTRODUCTION

A teacher-centered instructional approach has been dominant in higher education for years (Lak, Soleimani, & Parvaneh, 2017). Norman and Spohrer (as cited in Schiller, 2009) further stated that teacher-centered methodology has governed teaching, by having the instructors as the center of instruction and learning as well as making students follow the indications of teachers. Students in this methodology were passive receivers of knowledge. In the same respect, Brown K. L. (2003) noted that this approach was not working for new generations. There were classroom challenges that teachers could not manage. Consequently, an instructional paradigm shift was needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century classroom; especially when it involved the development of the speaking skill in the English language.

Human beings are social beings who need to communicate to each other (Reddy, Mahavidyalaya, & Hyderabad, 2016). If there is no a means of communication, people cannot interact with others. For this reason, these authors emphasized the role of English as a global language. Without a global language, a lot of misunderstandings will happen. Therefore, English is the means for international communication because people live in an era of intercultural conditions that are featured by a rapid adoption and assimilation of foreign cultures (McPhail, 2010).

Khamkhien (2010) pointed out that teaching and learning English is crucial for communicative purposes to meet the demands of globalization and to deal with the growing local, national and international demands for English skills. Hence, in order to enable learners to speak in English fluently, an educational paradigm is needed. Learner-centered instruction, an approach, that concentrates more on the learner of any age or stage of development (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010). Cornelius-White & Harbaugh explained that teaching is seen as facilitation and instruction as engagement. They described a classroom as a place where classroom management is more about student´s empowerment than control. Likewise, to maximize high standards of learning, the educational system of the future must hold a learner-centered perspective because it concentrates on knowing and understanding each learner (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Leaner-centered instruction or active learning is a method of instruction in which the student is in the center of focus and the teacher has the least impression in language instruction (Mohammad, Mohammad, & Baybourdiani, 2012). The learner-centered

approach means self and life-long education when teachers should change their traditional roles from teller to coordinator and from material users to teaching material providers (Baldauf & Moni, 2006). In this regard, Cornelius-White & Harbaugh (2010) additionally remarked that learner-centered instruction is an approach to teaching and learning that prioritizes facilitative relationships, the uniqueness of every learner, and the best evidence on learning processes to promote comprehensive student success through engaged achievement. They further mentioned that learner-centered instruction is foremost an ethical and interpersonal endeavor, which is best pursued with an eye toward holistic learning goals and flexible use of a wide variety of instructional methods.

The relationship between learner-centered instruction and the speaking skill is relevant. Al-Tamimi (2014) indicated in the study that the shift from the teacher-centered learning model to a learner-centered model has changed foreign language pedagogy. In fact, this author concluded in the study that cooperative learning, a student-centered approach, improved the speaking skill and attitude among learners because it requires each learner to develop a sense of personal responsibility to learn and it promotes interaction while doing a task. Similarly, Shalaby (2012) emphasized that with learner-centered instruction, students receive input since they are exposed to a foreign language learning environment that encourages their aural skills. Moreover, this approach promotes learning by doing in order to get more involved in learning and task based learning to achieve more communicative competence

2. METHODS

In this research paper, two variables in the teaching learning process were analyzed. Thus, a vast amount of studies, papers and books were explored and analyzed to gather information about learner centered instruction and the speaking skill. To do the research, some source engines and data bases were used like: google scholar, scopus and Harzing´s publish or perish, ScienceDirect and others.

3. RESULTS

The history of learner-centered instruction

Learner-centered approach has its origins from a constructivist theory, in which students learn more by doing and experiencing rather than by observing (Dr. Bada & Olusegun, 2015). In this theory, students are the inventors and designers of their own learning and knowledge making rather than passive learners who receive knowledge from expert teachers (Brown J. K., 2008). Furthermore, this theory was first developed at the

start of 20th century and was influenced by the American philosopher and educator John Dewey and sociologist Lev Vygotsky (Kenneth , 2003).

Considering that learner-centered instruction is based on social-constructivism, it is essential to put emphasis on its perspective which couples individual learners-their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs-with a focus on learning (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Likewise, Gunderman, Williamson, Frank, Heitkamp, & Kipfer (2003) explained that in learner-centered instruction, students are viewed as active participants in the learning process. They also considered that the main purpose of education is to produce educated students. Moreover, these authors argued that teachers should take into consideration what learners bring to the classroom. This way, less emphasis on what they know is placed.

Nunan (1988) noted that learner-centeredness has an important role in language pedagogy. Although learner-centeredness might be similar to traditional curricula in terms of its elements, it differs from it in the sense that learners will take part in the curriculum process closely. Both teachers and learners will work collaboratively to develop the curriculum. This way, learners´ styles and strategies are considered when planning.

Identically, Breen as cited in Nunan (2004) emphasized the benefits of interrelating learner-centeredness with the activities they do to develop the speaking skill. He mentions that there is often a disparity between what teachers want to achieve as a result of an activity and what the students really want from them. Therefore, if learners participate in developing the curriculum, the learning outcomes will reflect the learners´ opinions and preferences in terms of activity completion, the situation in which the activity is done as well as the difficulties.

Similarly, applying learner-centered instruction in the classroom has some effects on the relationships, curriculum, instruction, learner grouping, and evaluation. For example, the relationships between the instructor and learners are more collaborative; the curriculum is more thematic, experiential, and inclusive of multiple perspectives; the instruction allows for a broad range of learning preferences, builds from learners' strengths, interests, and experiences, and is participatory; grouping is not tracked by perceptions of ability but rather promotes cooperation, a shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging; and evaluation considers multiple intelligences, uses authentic assessments, and fosters self-reflection (Staff, TEAL Center, 2010). This point is also sustained by the

work of Lea, Stephenson, & Troy (2003) since these authors emphasized the main tenets of learner-centered instruction. Active learning, deep learning, learners taking responsibility, learner autonomy, interdependence between teachers and learners and mutual respect as well as reflexive learning characterize this approach.

Undoubtedly, the use of good activities as a way of learning gives learners the chance to plan and take responsibility of their learning (Nunan, 2004). Equally important is what the author expressed about the relevance of learner-centered instruction and its strong connection to communicative language teaching.

Learner-centered instruction principles

The learner-centered principles become foundational in determining methods for using and evaluating programs and practices that provide instruction curricula, and personnel to enhance the teaching and learning process (Mccombs & Vakili, 2005). The principles are organized in four categories: cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors and individual-differences factors. Within these categories, there are principles that are focused on the learners, how they learn successfully and develop higher order skills and feel motivated in meaningful learning environments. In the same sense, Cornelius-White & Harbaugh (2010) stated that the principles were created as a collection of evidenced-based principles that highlight the active and relational psychosocial and constructivist aspect of learning, instead the traditional ideas of teaching which were focused more on the authoritative passing of knowledge to a passive and receptive learners.

Incorporating learner-centered instruction in the classroom

One of the methods that followed the principles of learner-centered instruction is task-based learning. Harmer (2007) stated that task-based learning is part of a communicative methodology. The participants of the learning process focused their attention on the realization of tasks. Thus, language is not what is emphasized. The same author pointed out that a common task-based learning lesson has three phases: pre-task, a task cycle and language focus. This process makes learners independent learners and active participants of the learning process.

On the same topic, Nunan, D. (2004) mentioned that the relevant element in task-based learning is a task; which can be categorized as target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Under target tasks, the author explained that they have to do with the use of language outside the classroom and pedagogical tasks are the ones that are carried out in the

classroom. Similarly, Breen as cited in Nunan (2004) defined pedagogical tasks as the language learning activities which are done in the classroom and have specific objectives, content, procedure and outcomes. Hence, the focus is not on the language used by the students but on the outcome reached at the end of the task.

Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2000) indicated that the main objective of a task-based approach is to provide students with a natural context to use the language. Students have the chance to interact while doing the task so the interaction contributes to understanding each other, expressing meaning as well as enhancing the speaking skill in the English language. Additionally, Richards & Rodgers (2001) stated that tasks enhance learner´s motivation since they have various formats. These techniques focus on or account for learners´ needs, styles and goals and are designed to foster students´ creativity and innovation. What´s more, students´ sense of competence and self-worth are taken into account when tasks are devised (Brown, H. D., 2007).

Teaching speaking

Studying English does not only mean focusing on syntactic accuracy or grammar. Instead, it means giving opportunities to learners to use English in real life contexts (Poonpon, 2017). With this base, speaking is the most fundamental of human skills and it can be particularly difficult because, speaking happens in real time in contrast to reading and writing (Bailey, 2002). Additionally, Brown, H. D. (2007) defined speaking as a process that implies meaning, interaction and therefore communication. The context takes an important role in the interchange since it helps the participants understand the message by paying attention to the physical environment, the purpose and the experiences that people possess.

Likewise, Hasan, A. (2014) stated in his study that the speaking skill permits people to have a feeling of satisfaction since they are able to communicate their ideas and thoughts precisely. However, the author pointed out that teaching the speaking skill does not represent an easy task. He noted that learners and teachers see learning to speak a foreign language hard. He also indicated in his study that this occurs because teachers use a traditional approach. Consequently, the focus is on grammar, vocabulary rather than communication. In other words, students are not involved in authentic communicative tasks.

To solve this issue, Hasan, A. (2014) proposed the use of task based learning as a way to facilitate learning to speak in English because he said that this methodology is learner-

centered rather than teacher-centered. Using TBL, the author pointed out, students were involved in activities in which they have to use English contextually, they are encouraged and they learn in a free-anxiety environment. Additionally, the author makes clear that task based learning had a great influence on teaching the speaking skill. Learning by doing and experience constitutes the essential part of all learning (Lindeman, 1926).

Harmer, J. (2007) noted that students easily speak in class when there is a good atmosphere, the language is suitable for the level, the topic is appropriate and the tasks are apposite and well-organized. In the same sense, Brown, H. D. (2007) indicates some characteristics of task based learning such as: tasks awaken students´ interest, they help to achieve communicative goals for example the author points out a target task in which students give personal information in a job interview. Additionally, the author mentioned that depending on the level, students participate in problem-solving tasks.

According to Wlodkowski, R. J. (2011), learners have prior knowledge, so for learning to take place, a practical way to learn is by connecting what learners previously knew to the new knowledge or skills. In terms of biology, learning requires teachers to discover what learners understand and are able to do. This way, such information is considered a map for teachers to design the instructional process.

Additionally, the author stated that emotions are relevant when learning and they are related to the learners´ culture. In fact, emotions have an impact on task involvement. Therefore, the way how learners respond to a task depends on their culture. The author concluded that culturally responsive teaching is remarkable whether instructors want to teach young adults effectively.

Shumin, K. (n.d) stated that interaction contributes to improve speaking abilities in young adults. Thus, teachers need to provide learners with authentic and meaningful tasks. This way, learners take advantage of tasks to exchange ideas, experiences and prior knowledge. On the other hand, Brown, H. D. (2007) pointed out that there are some characteristics that differentiate learners. For instance, authenticity and meaningfulness are relevant to this group of learners. Consequently, the author recommended focusing more on the learners by giving them the chance to make decisions about the tasks they want to do during the lesson, in other words, emphasizing learner-centeredness.

Types of tasks to promote interaction and develop the speaking skill

Richards & Rodgers (2001) explained that in language acquisition, speaking and trying to communicate with others are considered the principal focus as well as in task-

based learning. They also emphasized that conversation is comprised in a great number of tasks used in TBL. This is the case that Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun as cited in Richards & Rodgers (2001) provided a classification of tasks based on conversations and interaction. This classification includes jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, decision-making tasks and opinion exchange tasks. All the aforementioned tasks are suggested to provide suitable opportunities for productive use of the language. In the same sense, Swain in Richards & Rodgers (2001) pointed out full opportunities to provide input and output which are given when tasks are utilized.

When applying task-based learning to teach the speaking skill, learners have various roles that are similar to the roles learners have in Communicative Language Teaching. Since students are engaged in tasks, they usually work in pairs or in groups, so they are active participants. They are also risk-takers and innovator because they are required to guess from the context, ask for clarification as they are the main characters in the learning process (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

CONCLUSION

From the research that has been done, it is possible to conclude that learner-centered instruction has a big impact on developing the speaking skill. Learners can develop the speaking skill through the realization of tasks, which are devised along with the learners and taking into consideration their needs and characteristics. Additionally, it is relevant to mention that students learn by doing. When that occurs, learning is more meaningful and long-lasting. The role the teacher assumes is different. It is more of a facilitator than the person who does most of the talking. This change has a positive impact on the learning process since the learners are the most important participants in the classroom. They become more active and take responsibility for their own learning. Students work in a learning environment which is characterized by interaction, meaningfulness, authenticity and motivation.

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