

## NIGERIAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING (SCL)

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### **Abstract**

Learning is essential in human's life as it is evidenced by the transformation of biological being to a knowledgeable being via learning process. It is now a global concern to devise an educational pedagogy that can support long life learning that can enhance the productivity and creativity of the learner. This led to the adoption of the Student-Centered Learning (SCL) curriculum which has contributed immensely in this regard. Nigerian educational system is characterized with the passive traditional teacher-centered lecture method; which renders the students inactive. There have been series of probing question on such an outdated learning approach. Therefore, this paper presents the findings of the study carried out to investigate the perceptions of Nigerian students in some Malaysian public Universities about the SCL approach in terms of the perceived benefits and satisfaction. The study involves 222 students from four public Universities in Malaysia using questionnaire as the survey instrument which was developed for the two constructs (perception (benefits) and satisfaction). The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings of the study showed that the surveyed students perceived SCL to be of great advantages in their learning process and they were satisfied with the approach especially the collaborative form of SCL.

**Keywords:** Student-Centered Learning, pedagogy, collaborative approach, higher education, life-long learning.

### **Background to the Study**

The impact of globalization has not left educational system out (Olaniyan & Obadara, 2006). According to the authors, it has called for urgent changes in the educational system in order to meet the current demands of the society. Practically speaking, learning environment cannot be separated from the overall learning objective. There have been series of emphasis on the need to change to student-centered learning (SCL) approach if the global educational objectives have to be realized (United Agency for International Development (USAID), 2006). Students are generally seen as passive learners and recipients of educational content in the traditional classroom of higher institutions in Nigeria (Iyamu & Ukadike, 2007).

Several researchers have defined SCL from different perspectives, but the key components are universal to all the definitions. The definition offered by Wohlfarth, Sheras, Bennett, Simon, Pimentel and Gabel (2008) seems to be more applicable to this study where SCL was defined in terms of learning objectives and outcomes which led to the following operational definition:

SCL is viewed as a paradigm shift from the conventional teacher-dominating methods through placing more emphasis on the learning objective than the teaching process. Here, the interest is on how students learn rather than how teachers teach. This means that the environment is learners-driven. Here, the teacher always thinks of the students in everything he/she does. Part of what makes SCL a novel approach is its ability to integrate individual differences in terms of the intrinsic values by being able to learn according to one's pace (Ayele, Schippers & Romas, 2007).

It can be noted that the definition of SCL is towards the betterment of learning in a manner that will develop the hidden potentials in the students. This is what is really lacking in the Nigerian tertiary educational system as most undergraduates are always engrossed with writing lecture notes, they in

most cases enjoyed only translated literacy; and this makes the educational content in Nigeria a teacher-directed and individualistic content.

The Nigerian formal education has long been dominated by the traditional lecture method where the lecturer or professor impart knowledge to the passive learners through oratories; which makes students to be passive recipients of information and thus memorizes facts for tests and examinations. Thus, Lowerison, Sclater, Schmid and Abrami (2006) states that faculties tended to rely on lectures and reading from the texts that culminate with a final exam to measure achievement.

The recent advances in education is centered on the promotion of school learning with students being active participant in the learning process and thus expose the weaknesses of the teacher-centered approach; since teaching is actually not learning. In line with the positions of a number of authors, SCL is a learning environment where the construction of the knowledge is carried out by student (learner) while the Lecturer is regarded as a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information (O'Neill & McMahan, 2005) where creative thinking and self-learning are identified as the important components. This is supported by Kember (1997)

The SCL method is implemented in the curriculum of Malaysian Universities which some Nigerian students have come to benefit from at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For this reason, this study is aimed at examining the views of the Nigerian postgraduate students in the Malaysian Universities on the consequences of SCL approach having experience both paradigms.

Institutions have claimed to be using the SCL approach where in the real sense of it, they are not practicing the method (O'Neill & McMahan, 2005). According to the author, SLC can be viewed as flexible learning, experimental learning or self-directed learning, these concepts are misunderstood by so many people. Therefore a perception study is essential while introducing the paradigm.

### **Issues and Motivation of the study**

The emphasis on the learning outcome at university level is on the ability to impart knowledge in the learner which is capable of bringing out the soft, personal, interpersonal and communication skills among the students in the chosen area of study. The soft skills refer to the core knowledge in the area of study. The Nigerian university educational system is lacking in this regard since what the students acquire throughout their stay in the university is the core knowledge (Olaniyan & Obadara, 2006; Iyamu & Ukadike, 2007). This is done at the expense of imparting knowledge necessarily assisting the learners towards acquiring neither the critical thinking nor the creativity skills. Even outside Nigeria, various sources have established the fact that SCL presents a better way of imparting knowledge (USAID, 2006; Kaneez & Mihya, 2007; Wohlfarth et al., 2008).

In a similar study conducted by Iyamu and Ukadike (2007), it is revealed that despite the fact that students acknowledge the immense benefits of the self-directed cooperative learning, they are still not prepared to use the approach because of the envisage fear of its participatory nature. This implies that the right set of students to be investigated in a study of this nature, are those who have come in contact with both teaching and learning approach.

The associated problems with teacher-centered approach discussed among others inform the need to embrace the SCL approach in Nigerian university educational systems. The challenges here come from recognition of the fact that for this approach to be well appreciated by the students, it requires having experienced both paradigms which informs their choice and motivation to use the approach. This in line with the position of Mihyar and Kaneez (2007) that motivating students towards SCL is important in achieving successful implementation of the approach.

It is revealed that for any educational system to be able to deliver the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational goal there must be active participation of students by using the computer assisted learning facilities (McPherson, Wang, Hsu, & Tsuei, 2007). Though, this is just one of the several types of SCL, the

same holds for all other SCL methods. The implication of this is that any country that is lagging behind in this regard will not be able to achieve the millennium educational goal.

The researchers therefore, are of the opinion that the findings of this study will be able to better understand perception of Nigerian students about SCL and to know how they can be motivated toward using the approach in the nearest future. In achieving this, a general research question is raised that “*How do Nigerian students feel about different methods of SCL?* “. The variables to be involved in the study are therefore, perception and satisfaction.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Perceptions and evaluation of SCL***

It has been endorsed by researchers and policy makers around the world to use the active, student-centered pedagogies (Darling-Hammand & Bransford, 2005; USAID, 2006). The SCL model of teaching is said to have highlights minimal teacher lecturing or direct transmission of factual knowledge, multiple small group activities which engage students in discovery learning or problem solving and frequent student questions and discussions (Leu & Price-Rom, 2006; Mihyar & Kaneez, 2007).

According to the Greenwood Dictionary of Education, active learning is said to be the process by which students are kept mentally and often physically active in their learning through activities that involve them in gathering information, thinking and problem solving. Basically, SCL is different from the traditional teaching model in the sense that it focuses more on students than teacher and also emphasizes on learning rather than teaching. It therefore calls for the use of flexible learning and teaching strategies in order to achieve the outcome from the required transition from teacher-centered teaching to SCL.

Adopting the SCL approach in the way and manner of carrying out the teaching and learning activities within the Nigerian educational system will require both the students and the teachers to enhance the inherent contradictions and paradoxes including having the responsibility of being both the facilitator and an evaluator and the student being both a learner and a teacher (Robertson, 2005). It is revealed that learner-centered concepts have come with promising results (Wells & Jones, 2005; Steckol, 2007). All these among others testify to the suitability of SCL in discharging the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge.

Lestari and Widjajakusumah (2009) concluded in their study that, for successful implementation of SCL approach, there is need for the assurance of the readiness on the part of the students to use method by encouraging them in this respect. This means that, a study of this nature is essential to examine the level of readiness based on the perception of Nigerian students who have come in contact with one type of the SCL method or the other.

According to Mihyar and Kaneez (2007), it is similarly agreed upon that the inability to fully explore the advantages of SCL can be traced to the lack of motivation of students for self-centered learning. The researcher is of the opinion that doing this requires studying their perceptions about various methods of SCL. This justifies the appropriateness of this study within Nigerian educational context.

Encouraging students to gain the required ability and skills of participating in cooperative/collaborative learning is a promising way of enhancing SCL interest in the minds of the students (Iyamu & Ukadike, 2007). Collaborative learning is one of the methods of SCL approach, it then becomes necessary to examine the level of satisfaction perceived by students in using this particular method.

The coming of on-line technologies and their application in the teaching and learning environment has been able to bring about a new type of self-directed, independent and lifelong learners (Craig, Goold, Coldwell & Mustard, 2008). This implies that the impact of technologies cannot be separated from the SCL approach. Then, there is need to identify the best technology that is capable of motivating the students to learn independently.

According to Ayele and Scippers (2007), for a SCL to be successfully implemented, there is need for continuous investigation and re-investigation about the feelings of the recipients (students) since the approach cannot be separated from the societal factors. It then means that the focus of this study is in line with the positions of the previous authors.

A general study of the effect of integrating SCL in to secondary school teaching and learning curriculum in Philippine revealed that if students are motivated towards the approach, there is every indication that they exhibit a sense of ownership and control over the learning process which can allow them to easily learn from each other safely (Ramos, 2007).

It is revealed that a study conducted in UK university showed the positive impact of SCL when using the approach in the classroom, students tend to feel more respected, more interested in the learning process, more excited and more confident (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Such index can be integrated into the questionnaire in measuring student's satisfaction with SCL teaching and learning experience.

According to Ayele and Schippers (2007), perception about SCL also depends on some extrinsic values of the students which varies from one culture to another. This implies that it is not possible to have the same perception about the SCL approach from students of diverse cultures. Therefore taking Nigerian students as the population of interest in this study will give a real picture of how Nigerian students feel about SCL.

It is revealed that the lack of adequate books and journal in most African universities suggests the popularly used teacher-centered approach which solely depends of note taking by the students and fails to really develop the creativity in the students (Iyamu & Ukadike, 2007). Implementing the SCL approach in such a scenario will force it on the universities to procure necessary books and other academic materials that can facilitate learning in and SCL environment.

For the singular fact that quality cannot be compromised in anything we engage ourselves in, education authorities across the world are aggressively integrating quality assurance and quality control methods in the way institutions are managed in terms of their teaching programmes by using SCL approach (Diamantis & Benos, 2007). Since it has been proved that the traditional teacher-centered approach cannot deliver the 21<sup>st</sup> century form of knowledge (Davies, Lavin & Korte, 2007), it then becomes necessary for any country that considers meeting the global educational challenges important to switch to the SCL approach.

According to Wang (2009), An SCL learning process is considered adequate in delivering critical thinking skills to students if it is designed in such a way that can deliver all the critical thinking skills which include knowledge, comprehension, inference, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills. All these constitute the items to measure critical thinking skills in the instrument.

The possibility of using different distinct methods of SCL led to series of confusion in the real practice of the approach. Student-centered learning is a widely used term in teaching and learning. Many terms such as such as flexible learning, experiential learning, and self-directed learning have been associated with it (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). These different perspectives have been addressed by quite a number of researchers in this area of research. The way people feel about this teaching and learning approach is different due to the varying experiences resulting from the difference in the delivery method. It is equally revealed that some people claim to be using SCL where in actual sense they are not using the approach (ibid).

Independent project, group discussion, debates, field trips, practical, reflective diaries, computer assisted learning, article writing and portfolio development are identified as the basic types of SCL teaching and learning methods (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). From these classifications, the main categories can be formed as follow: **self-directed method** (independent project, article writing, portfolio development, reflective diaries, debates), **collaborative method** (group discussion, group project, group assessment), **computer assisted learning** (online teaching, hands on exercise, etc.), **problem-based** (practical, field trips).

### **Measuring Student satisfaction**

In every educational system, an appraisal of how satisfied the students are with the teaching and learning process is necessary to improve on the system. According to Diamantis and Benos (2007), student satisfaction are a function of many parameters which include the curriculum used, the range of academic subjects taught, academic staff training, teaching materials used and social and intellectual experience furnished by the institution. All these are adequately measured by the research instrument for measuring satisfaction of SCL approach.

Similarly, an issue paper prepared by BC College & Institute of Student Outcome revealed that in measuring student satisfaction about the teaching and learning process, curriculum, teaching, analytical skills, communication skills, social skills and personal growth are considered as essential parameters.

### **Research Methodology**

For this research, quantitative survey approach is employed since the purpose of research is mainly a study of perception to describe how Nigerian students feel about using SCL. It is revealed that a descriptive research, quantitative approach is considered the most suitable research approach (Sekaran, 2000). The unit of analysis is Nigerian students in Malaysian Universities. According to Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2009), the international student statistics showed that 538 Nigerians are studying in the public higher education institutions. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), in the table of sample sizes provided for various populations of sizes 10 to 500, million where N (population) and n (required sample size) are listed using the a sample of 220 respondents is considered appropriate for this study which were drawn randomly from a number of public universities in Malaysia. The instrument used in this research for collecting data is a questionnaire which was adapted from previous studies. The questionnaire is then divided into four parts. Part A has to do with the background information about the respondents, which include the respondent's field of study, respondent's age, respondent's experience with SCL and respondent's preferred type of SCL. Part B examines the benefits of learning through SCL using 20 items with five likert-scale. Part C measures satisfaction level of the user with SCL and is made up of 24 items while part D allows the respondents to supply their personal opinions and suggestions that might not be captured by the variables. The survey instruments went through both content and construct validity to further validate and improve it. For the content validity, it was given to 5 experts in quantitative research design and their comments were used to improve its quality after which, a pilot study was conducted. The test of Cronbach's alpha of 0.937 and 0.723 for perception and satisfaction respectively shows an acceptable level of consistency among the items that constitute the two constructs (Sekaran, 2000). The research data were collected using personal questionnaire administration method due to it associated benefits (William, 2003). Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

### **Results**

The sample population is distributed across five major fields of study to reflect the variation in the type of applicable SCL methodology in different fields of study. In a total of 222 respondents, 47 respondents representing 21.2% of the population are drawn from Arts, 38 respondents representing

17.1% of the total population are drawn from Applied Science field, 61 respondents representing 27.5% are from Social Science field of study and finally 76 respondents representing 34.2% are drawn from the field of humanities. The population is also distributed by the age of respondents where 52 respondents representing 23.4% of the overall population are less than 25 years of age, 113 respondents representing 50.9% of the sampled population fall between 25 and 35 years of age, 49 respondents representing 22.1% of the population are between age 36 and 45 while the remaining 8 respondents representing 3.6% of the population are above 45 years of age. The sampled population by the type of SCL the respondent has experienced shows that 23 respondents representing 10.4% of the sampled population choose self-directed type of SCL, 161 respondents representing 72.5% of the sampled population are said to be familiar with collaborative type of SCL which presents the most popularly used, 31 respondents representing 14.0% of the sampled population are said to have used computer assisted type of SCL while 7 respondents representing 3.2% of the sampled population are familiar with the problem-based type of SCL.

Descriptive analysis is used showcase the perceived benefits and satisfaction of SCL approach using the descriptive means. The degree of agreement or disagreement with individual item under Perceived benefits of SCL methodology is described in Table 1 with the descriptive mean in descending order. It can be seen that the 22 items recorded the highest mean while only 5 items on the disadvantages of SCL item recorded the lowest mean.

**Table 1: Descriptive Mean for Perception of SCL**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
SCL assists me to learn how to put what learnt in to use	4.59	.493
SCL assists me to learn how to make conjunction on something done for <i>more information</i>	4.59	.493
SCL assists to learn how to internalize, recall and connect with other information	4.59	.493
SCL assists me to learn how to experience, observe, intuit and research	4.59	.493
I will always like to be involved in SCL	4.59	.493
SCL helps students to develop their interaction skills	4.59	.493
SCL helps to build self-esteem in students	4.59	.493
SCL assists to learn how to recognize parts and subparts and putting them together	4.50	.501
SCL assists to learn how to detect needed procedures and possible consequences	4.50	.501
SCL develops intimacy that can lead to various forms of relationships between opposite sex	4.50	.501
SCL creates environment of active learning	4.50	.501
SCL helps students to develop their listening skills	4.50	.501
SCL helps students to develop their teamwork skills	4.50	.501
SCL helps students to develop their leadership skills	4.50	.501
SCL enhances retention	4.32	.501
SCL develops higher level thinking	4.32	.467
SCL enhances academic achievement	4.23	.467
SCL provides positive attitude toward the subject matter	4.23	.493
SCL helps students to develop their communication skills	4.09	.493
SCL reduces test anxiety	4.09	.493
SCL enhances student's satisfaction with learning experience	4.00	.493
SCL makes some students to exploit the ideas of others and withhold their	1.93	.493
SCL students are retarded by learning with weaker peers	1.93	.493
SCL exposes the weaker students to the ridicule of others	1.93	.493
SCL is mostly dominated by the out-spoken and intelligent students	1.66	.501
SCL is time-consuming	1.44	.501

**Table 2 Descriptive Mean for Benefits with SCL**

Item	Mean	SD
It develops values and ethical standards	4.32	.467
It offers quality instruction	4.27	.445
It gives opportunities for presentation	4.27	.416
It gives opportunities for class discussion	4.27	.416
Instructs are available even after class	4.27	.416
It enhances effective reading and comprehension ability	4.17	.374
It assists in understanding self abilities	4.14	.352
It teaches how to work effectively with others	4.14	.352
It delivers clear and concise writing skills	4.14	.343
It enhances problem-solving skills	4.09	.293
It improves analytical thinking	4.09	.293
It improves critical thinking	4.09	.293
It delivers effective communication skills	4.09	.293
It develops supportive relationships	4.07	.252
It supports independent learning	4.00	.000
It educates one on the application of knowledge	4.00	.000
It delivers knowledge generation ability	4.00	.000
It presents a better way of examining student	4.00	.000

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

The result shows that, most of the surveyed Nigerian students seem to be more comfortable with the collaborative type of SCL. The descriptive frequency table shows collaborative method of SCL is most popular among all types of SCL since it allows teamwork and collaboration among all parties involved in the learning process. This is fundamental requirement in the present knowledge era (k-era) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The result of the perception equally revealed that the respondents have a positive perception of the SCL approach as can be seen that all positive statements in the construct have a high mean score of greater than 4 ( $M > 4$ ). Thus exposure to the new learning methodology enables the students to perceived it we which is in line with previous academic claim (Diamantis & Benos, 2007). The implication is that SCL methodology is of immense assistance to the students' learning activities. For the second construct which is the satisfaction which is measured in terms the tangible benefits offered by SCL, the results show that all the listed benefits of SCL are perceived by the respondents with mean score of 4 and above ( $M \geq 4.00$ ). The average mean for the 22 items which captures the main benefits of SCL are on the agreement side ( $M > 4.00$ ). For the last five items that constitute the disadvantages of SCL, the low value of average mean ( $M < 2.00$ ) signifies that the respondents disagree with these negative statements. This is in line with the position of a number of authors (Wells & Jones, 2005; Steckol, 2007) among others that SCL has come with promising results. This implies that the experience of the sampled students with SCL was a nice and interesting one. The positive trends in terms of the respondents perceptions of the SCL is an acknowledgement of the positions of the previous authors that, SCL is the only teaching and learning paradigm that can deliver the kind of knowledge required to cope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To determine the perceived satisfaction of the surveyed students about SCL approach a descriptive statistics is run for the variable to showcase the mean response as shown in Table 2. The degree of agreement or disagreement with individual item under Perceived satisfaction of SCL methodology is described in Table 2 with the descriptive mean in descending order. It can be seen that all the items recorded high mean of greater than 4 ( $M > 4.0$ ) for all items. The implication is that all surveyed students feel satisfied with SCL methodology.

Therefore, it is recommended that Nigeria as a developing country should do all possible to achieve successful implementation of such a promising pedagogical approach within her HEIs context. However, SCL is perceived as such in Malaysian HEIs due to the fact that it is almost fully adopted and accepted by the stakeholders (teachers and students). Thus, future researches to identify the factors that can predict the adoption of SCL curriculum in Nigeria HEIs are encouraged.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the exposed Nigerian students are quite satisfied and are found to perceive SCL as a better pedagogical approach compared to the traditional approach they were exposed to in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary to implement this approach in Nigerian HEIs gradually so that the beauty of it as perceived by the students can suggest its full adoption. From the suggestions and opinions of the respondents it is also deduced that the strategic planning in preparation to implement SCL in Nigerian HEIs should consider technological environment, physical environment, teacher's attitude and training.

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