

## STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING (SCL) APPROACH IN EFL CLASSES

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Student-Centred Learning (SCL) approach. It is argued that while SCL application is related to learning activities in classrooms; it is also strongly related to the efforts of motivating learners, involving them in creating goals of learning, and encouraging them to find the relationship between their learning and their life experience. Furthermore, it is explained that the application of SCL is partly related to cultural issues, both from teacher and learner perspectives.

**Key words:** Student Centred Learning, motivation, culture.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini membahas pendekatan Pembelajaran Berbasis Siswa. Penulis berpendapat bahwa selain berhubungan dengan aktivitas pembelajaran di dalam kelas; pendekatan ini sangat terkait pula dengan usaha memotivasi siswa, melibatkan mereka dalam membuat tujuan pembelajaran, dan mendorong mereka untuk menemukan hubungan antara kegiatan belajar mereka dengan pengalaman hidup mereka. Selanjutnya, dijelaskan bahwa penggunaan metode ini terkait pula dengan faktor budaya, baik dari sudut pandang guru maupun siswa.

**Kata-kata kunci:** pembelajaran berbasis siswa, motivasi, budaya.

There has been a great shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning (SCL) approach in education, including in English teaching and learning. In Thailand, as part of the national curriculum set up in 2002, there was a suggestion to change the teaching approach to become more student-centred (Rogers 2002). The nature of SCL is strongly emphasized in Thai English Language Teaching as Nonkukhetkhong, et al (2006:2) say that:

The reform of the teaching-learning of English in Thailand follows the trend in contemporary English language teaching pedagogies which have focused on developing learners' communicative competence and on promoting learning strategies and learner autonomy in language classrooms.

In Malaysia, the new curriculum for English language is implemented by using Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach (Mustafa, 2012:269). This approach requires much emphasis on student-centred learning process as "It is designed to develop learners' ability to engage in meaningful and fluent communication" (Ellis, Willis and Willis, and Dickinson in Mustafa, 2012:270).

Similar change of attitude toward learning approach also happens in Indonesia. At the level of higher education, SCL has been endorsed as the main approach used in the learning process. This can be seen in some Indonesian university documents (Universitas Tadulako, 2011:26); Suharto and Abadi (2011); and

Universitas Hasanuddin (2011) for examples). Meanwhile, at elementary and high school levels, SCL as well as the competency-based learning are the main elements in the teaching of language according to the school-based curriculum (Mattarima & Hamdan, 2011:101). These two authors emphasize that the focus of the curriculum is “more on learner-learning rather than teacher-teaching” (p.101). In other words, SCL becomes a prominent color in Indonesian language curriculum, including in EFL learning.

Furthermore, SCL is a clear implication of the implementation of Competency-Based Learning (CBL) approach in Indonesia. The characteristics of CBL—including the requirement of great flexibility and independence in learning (Marcellino, 2008:58), emphasis on language functions and interactions, and relating learning to the surrounding situation (Marcellino, 2008:59)—are clearly related to SCL. Despite the acknowledgement of SCL as a prominent approach, its application is not without challenges. The problems can be seen in several studies elaborated below.

A research by Nonkukhetkhong, et al (2006) show some findings about the perspective of Thai English teachers about the approach and how they implement the approach in Thai schools of secondary level. Although the teacher respondents in this study agree with the change to more learner-centred based approach, and know that giving more responsibility to students is required in applying the approach; they thought that students were not really independent yet. As a result, teachers' role is still prominent in the class. Furthermore, they reported many problems including the absence of proficiency development in the students, which might be due to limited teaching of language content. The other problems included less-qualified teachers, problems with students' motivation, low level of English skills, classes with many students, and limited resources. In the implementation, although the teacher

respondents have tried using various techniques that are more communicative in nature, it was found that they were still more teacher-centred. Moreover, the findings of this study suggested that the teachers' interpretation of SCL application is more on classroom level.

Another investigation by Mustafa (2012) was about the implementation of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) which can be regarded as a form of learner-centred learning. She found some problems experienced by teachers implementing the approach, including large number of students in one class, large range of differences in students' proficiency level, efforts they need in motivating students to practice English, and the fact that they still have to deal with an education system emphasizing students' success in examinations.

In Indonesia, a study by Marcellino (2008) on the implementation CBL (which reflects SCL) shows many constraints. Many teachers in this study did not apply facilitative role, and this was followed by the passive role performed by many students under investigation, indicated by their high-level obedience and low-level critical arguments toward their teachers. In the explanation, the author considers the phenomena as “cultural barriers” (p. 63).

The problem related to Indonesian cultural assumption has been raised by Dardjowidjojo & Nur (in Imperiani, 2012:5). They say that it is difficult for teachers to change their function from being the main source of knowledge to being learning facilitator due to cultural assumption they already have.

Two issues from these previous studies will be highlighted in this paper. The first one is related to one of the findings in the study of Nonkukhetkhong, et al (2006). According to the researchers, there was an indication that the teachers in the study: “. . . interpreted the learner-centred approach at the classroom level rather than at the course or curriculum level where students are supposed to take part in decision

making for course planning, implementation, and assessment and evaluation” (p.7). In contrast, this paper will describe that the application of SCL is not only limited to the actual process of learning activities in the class. It is also a matter of how to enhance learners’ motivation, involve learners in creating learning goals, and encourage learners to relate their learning to the actual situation out-side the class. The second issue raised in this writing is related to the cultural problem discussed in Marcellino (2008:63, 65). The writer agrees with the explanation in the study that the problematic implementation of learner-based approach based on CBL curriculum is partly due to cultural assumption held by Indonesian teachers and learners. In this paper, it will be explained that the cultural issue can be seen from two sides, teachers and learners. While teachers stick to the belief that they are the “givers” of knowledge, learners believe that they are the “receivers” of knowledge.

This paper starts with a short review about SCL approach. The following discussion explains ideas about: the importance of motivation in SCL; involving learners in determining learning goals; learning beyond the class; and the cultural issue related to Indonesian learning culture.

### **THE CONCEPT OF STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING (SCL)**

SCL emerged to counter the traditional teaching approach. The latter one - which is conducted in a sequence of presenting, practicing, and producing - emphasizes memorisation activities without encouraging students to think, resulting in learners characterized by passiveness, lack of autonomy, and limited capacity of creative and critical thinking (Thamraksa in Mustafa, 2012:269). This results in lack of ability to communicate. On the other hand, SCL encourages thinking skill and creativity in communication.

For example, in task-based language teaching (TBLT), an extension of Communicative Language Teaching, the main objective of learning is to improve students’ ability to use language in communication (Richards in Mustafa, 2012:270).

A short but comprehensive description of the origin of SCL concept is given in Hodge (2010). The writer starts by explaining that this learning approach can be traced far back to the education philosophy advocated by Socrates and Dewey, and it was brought to the centre of discussion again by Carl Rogers (p.2). He rooted his opinion on the concept of “ ‘client-centred therapy’ ” (p.2) which emphasizes the use of clients’ personal resources in solving their problems. Rogers, Hodge continues, says that the practice, which is based on “acceptance, understanding, and respect” (p.2) - can successfully facilitate the process of therapy, so Roger assumed that it might also facilitate learning process. Hodge concludes that Roger’s concept of SCL is much similar to Dewey’s suggestion concerning the change of teachers’ role from being the centre of learning activities to more as facilitators of students’ learning experience (p.2).

Furthermore, an explanation of the characteristics of SCL is given in Hodge’s (2010) article. According to Brandes & Ginnis in Hodge (2010:3), SCL is basically characterized by (1) the delegation of learning responsibility on learners; (2) construction of relevant and meaningful topics for learners; (3) the encouragement of learners’ engagement to realize learning experience; (4) the enhancement of collaboration between learners; and (5) the shift of teachers’ function toward the role of being a learning resource as well as facilitating the learning process. The first principle implies that learners are responsible for what and how they learn. Consequently, they need opportunity to determine the content of the subjects they learn, which is the second principle. The learning subjects are expected to contain topics related to the learners’ need. Only in that

way, students can get meaningful learning experience. When learners perceive their learning experience as meaningful, they will be more likely to contribute in the process, which is the core of the third principle. The fourth principle emphasizes the importance of creating connection between students, and that implies the employment of a lot of collaborative works. The last one reminds that teachers would not be the centre of the process, which is the logical consequence of the first four principles. In short, in SCL, teachers are encouraged to give more opportunities to students to determine what and how they learn.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION IN SCL

The very first thing learners need to have in learning a language is motivation because it determines their success in language learning. Learners who have lower motivation would not be as successful as those who have higher motivation (Gardner in Al-Tamimi 2009:32). In other words, as Engin (2009:1036) says, "The motivation of the learners determines how ready and eager they are to get more information and to increase their ability to understand, write, and speak the second language". It can be concluded that learners would have more beneficial learning experience if they are well motivated (Engin 2009:1040).

Motivation becomes even more important in the application of SCL. The approach requires the decrease of teachers' role and the increase of learners' autonomy. Consequently, learners will have higher responsibility for the success of their learning process. This, absolutely, will be much determined by to what extent they are able to motivate themselves in achieving their goals in learning.

The question now is how to increase learners' motivation. A framework has been elaborated by Thanasoulas (2002) by referring to a concept given by Dornyei and

Otto. The framework consists of several steps elaborated below.

The first step is to set up a condition in which learners are motivated to learn. The author explains that it would need the awareness of the teacher to show enthusiasm through verbal and non-verbal language in order to create trust among learners so that they would be committed and interested in learning. This is true in my opinion. Displays of teachers' enthusiasm can make learners feel that they get full attention from their teachers. Learners may also feel that what they do and say are important. In addition, according to Thanasoulas (2002), it is important to create a safe classroom environment in which learners are free from underpressure feeling. This statement is also justifiable. Safe environment which does not create any fear among learners can increase learners' performance, such as in expressing opinions in discussions. An evident related to this opinion can be found in Novera (2004:481). In this study, one respondent expressed happiness due to the freedom given to learners to talk without any fear of negative judgement. Such positive feeling can become a good starting point for learners in dealing with further challenges in learning the language. Still in the effort to create motivated learning condition, Thanasoulas (2002) says that it is necessary to create a supportive group of learners managed with group regulations set up by the learners. This is also reasonable. Having supportive friends would be beneficial for learners because they get the opportunity to work together and help each other. When the groups consist of fast learners and slow learners, the collaborative atmosphere will be beneficial for both groups. The fast ones will get the opportunity to teach their peers, which even increases their understanding of the subject matter. For the slow ones, the collaborative learning atmosphere becomes a better alternative to high competitive learning style which tends to make them frustrated and left behind.

The second step in Thanasoulas' (2002) framework is to stimulate motivation among the learners. The author explains that it can be done by: (1) encouraging the learners to determine their own goals in learning, and to be committed to reach the goals; (2) relate the learning content to their need; and (3) have positive thinking of their ability to learn the language, and to find out the best way of experiencing the learning. Each will be elaborated below.

The first and second points of Thanasoulas' (2002) second step, in my observation, are not commonly practice in Indonesian EFL. What happens usually is that teachers teach English by using a textbook rigidly. As a result, the second point is rarely achieved too. When the School-Based Curriculum is implemented in Indonesia, actually teachers have the opportunities to involve learners in the designing process. Yet, it seems that not many teachers take the opportunity.

There are some possible reasons why not many teachers involve learners in determining what to learn. First, it is said that "Konsep bahwa perencanaan silabus kompetensi komunikatif harus didasarkan atas kebutuhan siswa, dan bukan atas suatu unit gramatikal atau lainnya, mempunyai implikasi yang sangat serius" (Salimbene in Sadtono 2010:67)—the concept that the planning of communicative competence syllabus should be based on students' need, and not based on a grammatical unit or other things, has a very serious implication (My translation). According to Sadtono (2010:67), "Hal ini berarti bahwa setiap guru harus juga seorang perencana silabus dan penulis materi, karena setiap kelas, bahkan setiap siswa, mempunyai kebutuhan yang unik, yang berbeda dengan kelas atau siswa lainnya."—This means that each teacher should also become a syllabus planner and material writer, because each class, even each student, has unique need, which is different from other classes or students (My Translation). In other words, if learn-

ers are involved in determining what to learn, there might be various demands from the learners so that teachers should find new materials and design new lesson plans. This will require teachers' creativity and take much time, which is difficult for teachers who already have overloaded working hours. In such situation, many teachers might think that it is much easier to stick to one text book in their teaching. Another reason is because EFL teaching in Indonesian schools is mostly driven by students' need to pass the exam. For this reason, EFL teaching at schools should follow all the topics set up in the National Curriculum. In a study by Exley (2004) about the experience of four Australians who became guest teachers in an Indonesian region, it was found that Indonesian teachers were very much driven by the need of the students to pass the final English examination (p.4). One of the Australian guest teachers said that "the Indonesian English teachers were limited by the set text they were using" (p.4). Interestingly, the Australian guest teachers were allowed, even supported, to teach other topics. One of the respondents said that "active communicative English" (p.6) is considered important by the school leader (p.6), and another respondent reported that the "Principal wanted the students to be enthused and to have their language activated" (p.6). This gives a hint that there might be a willingness among teachers and school leaders to have more student-centred EFL teaching in their classes, but they are constrained by the need to cover all topics set up in the National Curriculum for the purpose of final examination preparation.

In relation to the third point of Thanasoulas' (2002) second step, many learners in Indonesia find English one of the most difficult subjects at schools. As a result, many of them do not have confidence of their own ability to master English language, let alone to evaluate their learning experience and determine the best learning strategies to be used.

This situation, no doubt, creates big challenges for teachers in enhancing learners' motivation and implementing SCL, especially for those working at higher education levels where such negative attitude may have been fossilized among learners. Therefore, an urgent call is now for teachers to be aware of this motivation problem, and to increase their skills in motivating learners. In addition, the initiative can be also conducted at school/college level. It can be conducted in the form of information and training sessions, as well as through various displays of written slogans and quotes in strategic corners around the institution building. In this way, it is expected that learners are embraced with a totally supportive learning environment.

### **INVOLVING LEARNERS IN DETERMINING LEARNING GOALS**

It is a common practice for many teachers in Indonesia to teach what they or curriculum makers perceive as necessary for students to learn. Many times, students do not have opportunity to have a say of what they want/need to learn. They do not even know why they have to learn certain things, and not the other ones that might be more interesting for them. As a result, many students get bored; while many teachers get frustrated seeing their students do not learn what they teach.

To recover this situation, it is important to get learners more involved in the learning process. In SCL, learners' involvement needs to be started from the step of planning the learning process. Learners can be given the opportunity to determine their learning goals and the content of the English course. In fact, asking learners to determine their learning goals and relate what they learn to their need is one way of stimulating learners' motivation (See discussion about Thanasoulas' framework above).

One of the areas in which learners need to be involved so that learners can learn what teachers teach is "the experiential

content domain" (Nunan 1995: 134—139). In this domain, there are five things teachers need to do. The first four things are related to the goal and content of the course. They are to: (1) give learners the information about the objectives and the content of the course; (2) provide learners the opportunities to make their own selection of some alternative learning purposes; (3) give learners the chances to make some changes of pre-determined syllabus; and (4) give learners the chances to think and write the aims and targets of learning. These points, according to Nunan (1995:136), can be regarded as steps in a continuum, implemented by considering the situations of the learners involved. The first and the second levels, for example, might seem suitable for very young learners who have not had the ability to make decisions on what they need to learn; while the two further levels seem to be more appropriate for adult learners who have awareness of their own need. Further thought of these points give some new insights.

The first point, rising learners' awareness of the learning objectives and the items included in the syllabus, needs to be done every time a teachers starts a lesson. The goals or objectives that are usually mentioned in lesson plans need to be spelled out explicitly so that learners would know the targets of the learning process. One benefit of knowing the targets is that learners would be able to evaluate their own achievement. While being involved in the learning activities, learners can get a feeling whether they have achieved the goals, or are still far from them. When they know that they are still far away from the goals, they can be motivated to do more efforts.

Furthermore, when being invited to do selection of learning goals and objectives, learners can feel more freedom, creating a comfortable learning environment. Moreover, they can be more motivated to engage themselves in the learning process, because they know that they learn what

they really want. The feeling of freedom is extended when learners are given the chance to make some alternations on the pre-determined learning design. This is particularly necessary when learners feel that the syllabus does not yet accommodate their need. The enhanced freedom as well as the feeling of being accommodated can create a learning environment with greater comfort.

Much greater freedom can be given to learners by providing chances to set up their own learning goals, and determine the items to be learnt in a course. In courses with adult learners, the participants often come from certain work back-grounds, and they are aware of the situations in which they need English. In such situation, teachers just need to facilitate them to identify specific language items and particular communication skills related to their need. Even in courses with young learners, especially in this global era, the participants may already know the situations in which English skill can give benefit to them. For example, they might set up a target of being able to read newspaper articles with specific topics of their interest. Many young people nowadays have quite clear purpose of what they want to be in the future. When this is the case, teachers can assign learners to do a small-scale research project, thinking of what they really want to do in the future and finding out specific English skills needed for the activities by interviewing people who already do such jobs. Once they do the assignment, they can make their own learning objectives.

## LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASS

As the most advanced step of applying learner-based approach in the “experiential content domain” (Nunan 1995: 134), it is suggested that teachers require learners to make connections between their learning experience and their after-class activities (Nunan 1995:138—140). This is a kind of independent learning, another consequence of applying SCL pedagogy.

Such activity, according to some people, might seem difficult to do in EFL context. For example, in Indonesia English is not widely used in daily activities so that it can be difficult to gain opportunities to use English outside the class. This may lead to a total failure of English learning as Sadtono (2010:69) says that “...*pengajaran bahasa Inggris untuk ber-komunikasi yang setengah-setengah akan lenyap setelah beberapa bulan siswa meninggalkan bangku sekolah karena tidak dipakai*”—half-hearted efforts in the teaching of communicative English would lead to students forgetting the language six months after they leave the school, because they do not use the language (My translation).

However, in a study by Lamb (2011), some respondents regarded as highly motivated Indonesian learners show high achievement in English learning because they get access to extra resources outside school, such as English magazines, and friends who are willing to be partners in English practice (p.14). Moreover, in the current global situation and technology advances, English has become the language of contact in many forms of communication between many people from different countries. Some examples are email exchanges, online chats, and social network contact. Within such situation, more and more learners of EFL are exposed to English-facilitated communication through virtual world, the internet, so that it is now much easier for EFL learners to relate their English lesson to what they do outside the class. The effort to enhance learners’ autonomy and confidence becomes more important because in that way, learners motivation can be maintained and protected (Thanasoulas, 2002).

## THE CULTURAL ISSUE RELATED TO INDONESIAN LEARNING CULTURE

It is also important to deal with another constraint related to learners’ culture. In

the study of Marcellino (2008), it was found that despite of the determination of competency based-learning, which was expected to be more learner-based, there were still many problems. Teachers observed in the research still maintained their authoritative role (p.62), and the learners did not show any willingness to be critical, sticking to the common expectation that learners should show high level of obedience (p.63).

Limited responses from learners can be traced back to the habit of Asian people, including Indonesians. In many Asian societies, there is a belief that “the knowledge is passed down from teachers to students” (Kirkpatrick in Marcellino 2008:62). This implies the role of the teacher as the source of knowledge, and the role of students on the other hand as the knowledge receivers. As a result, many times classrooms become the places where teachers’ talk is dominant, while students listen and follow everything said by the teachers.

This practice has become a habit that it is difficult to change, even in a class where actually student-centred is the expected norm. This is evident in a study conducted by Novera (2004) about Indonesian students studying in Australia. Information from three respondents revealed that they had internal constraint in expressing ideas critically when their lecturers talked (p.481). According to the author, the cause is maybe because “In Indonesia students manifest their respect for older people such as teachers by being obedient and listening to them” (p.481).

Similar cases of limited responses from learners might also happen in other situations. Some teachers may have tried to apply SCL by reducing their use of classroom time and having more emphasis on getting learners to be more active, but then feel disappointed of lack of responses from learners.

Therefore, learners need to have training of various study skills required in SCL. The notions of active engagement, idea

contribution, and independent learning need to be clarified. The study skill training can be conducted at institutional (school or university) levels and then be reinforced by teachers during class activities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, implementing SCL is a big job. It requires trainings of teachers and learners. Teacher trainings need to cover the aspects of motivation and course design, in addition to the well known training sessions of learning strategies. In the same time, learners need to be well prepared. Their awareness, willingness, and skills to learn actively are important parts to be covered in the training.

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