

LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

*Teachers' Voices*¹

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper reports research findings and discusses teachers' perceptions and implementation of the learner-centred approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language in Thai secondary school contexts. Case studies of five in-service EFL teachers from five contextually different public secondary schools in Udon Thani, Thailand were developed from interviews, classroom observations and teachers' self-reporting. The findings suggest that teachers were attempting to implement the learner-centred approach, but that they were not confident about its underlying theory, and therefore the degree of the implementation depended on how the teachers used their understanding of that theory in their practice within the contextual constraints.

2. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANT OF THE STUDY

Under the Thai National Education Act (NEA) of B.E. 2542 (1999), the government has recently launched a series of educational reforms with the aim of developing Thailand into a knowledge-based society, which is a pre-requisite for becoming a knowledge-based economy. One of these reforms focuses on the nature of the learning process occurring in all subject areas at all levels of education, and is considered to be the heart of all the changes being implemented. This "learner-centred approach" includes concepts of self-education and life-long education. This change requires teachers to change their traditional roles, requiring them to transform themselves from 'tellers' to 'facilitators' and from 'materials users' to 'teaching materials creators' in order to promote learners' constructive self-learning.

English as a foreign language teaching, which is covered by this policy change, is becoming increasingly important in all aspects of Thai life for social, economic as well as academic global communication. However, although Thai students have

learned English in formal education for at least ten years before they graduate from the universities, recent research on the proficiency of the graduates suggests that the English language curriculum in Thai schools and universities has not been meeting the demands for workplace English (Wiryachitra, 2002; Keyurawong, 2002). While the new policy is meant to address these needs, its potential impact on English proficiency, i.e., will students be more proficient at graduation, remains to be seen.

Thai EFL teachers who are required to implement this learner-centred policy find themselves faced with a number of challenges in both the environment in which they work and related to the new goals they are asked to achieve. Traditionally, the Thai educational system has focused on teacher dominated chalk and talk or rote-learning. Students are taught to be passive, obedient and respectful to teachers. Teachers who are the products of the old educational system may find it difficult to manage the role reversal required in the new classroom where learners are the main players. Understandably, most Thai EFL teachers still used the teaching methods they were familiar with, namely, a textbook-based, grammar-translation approach where lessons and tests mostly focus on grammar structures, vocabulary, and reading in order to be prepared for university entrance examinations (Maskhao, 2002).

Since Thai language-in-education policy has directed that there be a change in the way English is taught, and programs are implemented, it is vital to evaluate this change early in the dissemination stage, especially in Thai rural contexts where a number of constraints remain unchanged, to understand the extent to which the learner-centred approach actually is being implemented. The results of this study provide valuable feedback for training pre-service teachers and for providing training and supervision for in-service teachers in rural contexts in order to develop and provide relevant assistance to meet the teachers' needs. Furthermore, this information may also be useful for educators in the Ministry of Education to alert them to the pre-service and in-service primary and secondary school teachers' needs that have to be met in order to support the effective implication of this innovation.

3. LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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. During 1970s-1980s the impact of learner-centeredness in language teaching was evident with the development of communicative approaches which shifted the attention of the teaching-learning processes from language form to language function, or to language use in accordance with the needs of learners (Savignon, 1997). This change in the approach to language teaching from traditional teacher-centred to more learner-centred (e.g. Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996), which as Nunan (1988: 179) noted, is "an offspring of communicative language learning" requires learners to participate and negotiate actively in meaningful interaction in order to interpret and construct meaning by themselves (Breen & Candlin, 1980).

The learner-centred approach is based on the idea that learners can learn better when they are aware of their own goals. Thus, this model for language curriculum development shifts from *what should be done* in a course of study to *what is specifically done* by language teachers in their classes, through negotiation between teachers and learners in the planning, implementation and evaluation of language courses (Nunan, 1988). Students' needs and learning styles are analysed and used for selecting course content and teaching methodologies. Evaluation is an on going process in every stage of teaching and learning. Self-assessment by each student is regarded as important as assessment by teachers. Two key components of the learner-centred classroom are first, placing more responsibility in the hands of the students to manage their own learning, and second, teachers taking roles as facilitators of knowledge to help learners learn how to learn rather than being the source of knowledge as was traditionally the case. Teachers can foster learner autonomy by creating and maintaining a learning environment through communicative tasks through which students can develop their language and learning skills to become autonomous learners. Experts and researchers have demonstrated that the learner-centred approach, which also promotes learner autonomy, can be applied in both ESL (e.g., Banks, 2000; Tudor 1996) and EFL classes (e.g., Lin, 2002; Sumie, 2001).

However, it is unrealistic to assume that all learners will be able to make their own choices about their learning process, especially young learners or those beginning levels. Thus, negotiations between teachers and learners in developing a language program is not an all-or-nothing process (Nunan and Lamb, 1996), but a continuum in which levels and degrees of negotiation vary depending on the characteristics of the learners. In such a situation, teachers have to be familiar with a wide range of teaching methodologies, learning materials, study options, and be flexible and adaptable while school programs need to be resource rich to develop a successful learner-centred curriculum that caters for a wide range of student needs (Tudor, 1996).

While teachers may be a central element in change, context is also very important, not all innovations can be easily applied in every context, and the application of CLT is still controversial in EFL, especially in Asian contexts (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Burnaby and Sun, 1989; Canh, 1999; Howard, 1996; Jung & Norton, 2002). In the Thai context, where there is a shortage of qualified EFL teachers, the new policy has been mandated top-down. If the policy is to be successful, there is an urgent need to investigate the English proficiency of teachers and their capacity to develop learner autonomy through a learner-centred CLT approach. This is particularly true for Thai rural contexts where training and resources are likely to be fewer. Teachers need to be given a chance to reflect on how they perceive the system should work and how they implement the learner-centred approach. This NEA mandated reform is unlikely to be successfully undertaken without listening to the teachers' voices and responding to their concerns.

4. THE STUDY

To listen to teachers' voices on the learner-centred approach, case study data were collected between November, 2004 and March, 2005 from five public secondary school in-service EFL teachers working in the Udon Thani province using audio-taped interviews, at least five classroom observations (three of which were video-taped) and self-reporting questionnaires. It is important to note that all the teachers who participated in this study were recognised by the schools' principals as good, active and hard-working in developing the newly required student-centred teaching and learning processes, and that the study focused on how they perceived the new policy and how they put it into practice in their local contexts.

The participants were in their thirties and forties, were all BA or BEd graduates who had studied in the field of English and were teaching in secondary grades 8 or 9. They had taught English between 11-26 years, and like other Thai teachers, besides teaching English, they were also required to do extra work to meet the criteria for salary increments and promotion.

Amorn* taught in School A, which was the only school located in a provincial city. It was well known for its academic strength and regarded as one of the leading schools in the city. The typical classes in this school were over-crowded with an average of 65 students. Family backgrounds of the students varied but the majority of them were middle class including professionals, merchants, government officers, employees and farmers. The students' motivation for studying was high with 80-90 per cent of students from this school doing further studies at university level. (*Note that all teachers' names are pseudonyms.)

Benja*, Charoen*, Duangjia* and Emon* taught in Schools B-E which were located in rural areas. Schools B and D were district schools while Schools C and E were sub-district schools. The majority of the students in all four schools were from medium to low income families. Most of their parents were farmers and employees. Students had low motivation and the per cent of the students going on to further studies at university level was medium to low.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 The teachers' perceptions of the learner-centred approach

One of the main objectives of this study was to draw out the participants' perspectives on the learner-centred approach and communicative language teaching. The five teachers who participated in this study agreed with the policy of applying the learner-centred approach in EFL classes. They all understood that through the learner-centred approach, they needed to allow their students to take more responsibility for their own learning. However, they believed that it was not possible

for their students to learn everything by themselves, and that teachers still played a major role in preparing the lessons, presenting the content, modelling the examples and creating the activities for their students.

Amorn, Benja and Emon viewed language content, i.e., vocabulary, structure and pronunciation, as the priority in learning and teaching English as a Foreign Language. They believed that if the students learned enough content they would be able to use the content for communication purposes in the future. They claimed that their EFL classes included not only language content but also language skills, but they accepted that communicative activities were rarely used. Charoen and Duangjai viewed communicative ability as the goal of language learning. Both of them also regarded language content and language skills as important and tried to teach content and skills in contexts and through communicative activities. However, all of the teachers believed that they were more confident in teaching language content than communicative activities. These findings indicate that the teachers need more assistance to understanding basic concepts in CLT and more practical input in order to increase their confidence in developing communicative activities.

All of the teachers agreed that the learner-centred approach had the potential to enhance their students' positive attitudes towards learning English. They found that their students were more self-confident in using English since they had been involved in a more activity-based program. However, the teachers had not seen any improvement in the students' English proficiency, and were concerned that in using this approach students would spend too much time doing activities and would not learn sufficient language content, leading to subsequent problems when they studied at higher levels.

The teachers believed that the learner-centred approach could not be strongly applied in EFL classes because of the nature of English as a subject as it was difficult for their students to learn English by themselves since it was not their first language. Students, especially 7th-9th graders, still were dependant on teachers' explanations. Moreover, the teachers believed that the learner-centred approach was more suitable for bright and highly-motivated students rather than slow learners. They felt students still waited for knowledge from them and were not be able to make choices about their own learning. The teachers also felt that the "no fail" policy and the new ways of assessment that focused on performance testing and authentic assessment rather than on paper tests meant that a lot of low motivated students ignored the lessons and did not prepare for the tests.

As to the impact on the teachers themselves, they believed that the reform made them more active in the planning teaching and learning processes. They realized the need to change their role as a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator or a coach to teach their students to think and learn by themselves through a variety of activities and resources. However, they agreed that it was challenging for them to implement this change while the other conditions, for example inadequate teacher qualifications, students' low motivation and poor English ability, large classes and poorly resourced schools, still remained unchanged.

These findings suggest that the teachers wanted to teach their students to take the responsibility for their own learning, but they clearly did not know how to involve their students in teaching and learning processes, nor how to integrate this approach into their EFL classes. They identified that to successfully implement the learner-centred approach, the most important factors were the readiness of teachers and students to accept responsibility for doing this, and the availability of resources. Personally, they felt that they needed more time and support to gain insights into this approach in order to develop more learner-centred teaching skills.

Given these teachers' uncertainties, these findings suggest that the teachers had not been sufficiently prepared to implement the new learner-centred policy either in theory or practice. This ambiguity in the implementation of the curriculum innovation reinforces the importance of being clear about the changes that are being required of teachers (Fullan, 1991). Although the teachers had positive attitudes towards the policy, it was difficult for them as the policy implementers to adapt to the new policy requirements as they had not been properly trained. Therefore, policy outcomes were dependent on individual teachers' beliefs and understandings and this unavoidably impacted on how the teachers applied the policy to their teaching techniques in their individual contexts.

5.2 The teacher's implementations of the learner-centred approach

The five teachers from different contexts had similar perspectives on the policy, but how they were able to apply the policy to practice, as evidenced in their self-report questionnaires and the observed classes, varied from teacher to teacher and from class to class. For example, data from the self-report questionnaires showed that besides using vocabulary explanation, grammar explanation and structure drills, Benja reported the highest frequency of using a variety of communicative activities in most of her lessons, especially brainstorming, problem-solving and information gap filling. Duangjai reported the most frequent use of role-play – in 78 per cent of lessons reflected on. She also reported using task-based activities (61% of lessons), brainstorming (28%) and problem-solving (22%) in her classes. Charoen reported applying role-play, brainstorming, problem-solving and singing in less than 50 per cent of her classes. Amorn reported using role play in only four lessons and simulation, problem-solving and presentation in only one lesson of each of 15 lessons she reflected on. Similarly to Amorn, Emon reported using less communicative activities; only 12 per cent of lessons included role-play and self-study, and four per cent included report/presentation. Taken at face value, these self-reports suggest that some of the teachers were being more communicative than their initial interview data might suggest.

However, after a comparison of the self-report data with the interviews and classroom observations, some gaps were identified between self-reports and the classroom observations. Although, as we have seen, the teachers reported using a variety of the communicative activities, most of their teaching techniques were still traditional, for example grammar explanation, vocabulary explanation, translation,

and whole class drills and repetition. In most classes, the “communicative” production of the target language by students was in choral repetition or reading. English was used by the teachers only for basic instruction and if it appeared in the texts. Instead, emphasis was on analytic study of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. This suggests that perhaps the teachers did not really understand what communicative consist of.

The self-reports also indicated that group work and pair work were reported being used less often than whole class activity. The four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, were not taught equally. Three out of five teachers reported having a much greater focus on reading and writing than on speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, other than the selected textbooks, the teachers reported only infrequent use other teaching aids such as authentic materials, handouts and audio-visual aids. These self-reports suggest that these EFL classes were more text and teacher-dominated than learner-centred and communicatively-oriented.

Moreover, although the teachers reported using communicative activities such as role-play, information gap filling, brainstorming, simulation, group presentation and problem-solving, the key finding relating to these activities evident in the data gathered from classroom observations was the teachers interpreted those activities in practice in different ways. For example, Benja labelled as role-play in an observed lesson asking her students to practise the model dialogues in their handout and then present the dialogues to the class. Amorn also reported using pair work and role-play in an observed lesson, but the researcher only observed students reading the dialogues from their textbook, rather than doing real pair work or role play. Duangjai reported frequently using role-play, and from two observations of her lessons, it could be said that she used this activity appropriately. She asked her students to study the model dialogues and then to make their own dialogue and present to the class. Emon also applied the same concept of role-play as Duangjai but reported integrating the teaching technique in only one lesson.

All of the teachers agreed that their EFL classes were still not fully learner-centred and communicative oriented because of the constraints of the local contexts. If there was a continuum between teacher-centredness and the learner-centredness, they agreed that their position would be somewhere in the middle. All of the teachers claimed that they applied the learner-centred approach by involving their students in classroom activities as much as they could. This suggests that the teachers 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.

However, Duangjai had made some progress in involving her students in planning lessons by using a questionnaire asking the students about their interests, needs and learning styles. After the semester ended, she also asked her students to evaluate her course. In terms of self-assessment and peer-assessment, data from classroom observations showed some evidence that all of the teachers had made some attempts to ask their students to monitor their own answers as well as those of their peers. Emon provided an example of peer-assessment when she provided an

assessment form for her students to evaluate group presentations in one of the lessons.

The evidence suggests that most of the teachers had not been sufficiently trained on how to apply the aspects of the learner-centred approach and CLT effectively, and that this limited the benefits of communicative activities provided by the students. This gap between intent and practice and between knowledge and outcomes is something that teacher educators and supervisors need to consider in both pre-service and in-service teacher education if learners' communicative skills and learning strategies are to be improved.

6. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that teachers are attempting to implement the new learner-centred approach to CLT required by the 1999 Education Act. However, there are contextual factors that directly impacted on the implementation of the learning reform policy that illustrate that what may be appropriate to implement in other global contexts may not be equally successfully in particular local situations. The fact that the policy has required both teachers and students to develop new teaching and learning strategies, but has not equipped or supported schools with sufficient facilities, resources and learning environments, thus far has made the policy goals unrealistic and all but impossible to achieve.

Thus, this study raises concerns that all stakeholders need to take in to account when policy is being implemented in the dissemination stage. Policy cannot be successfully implemented without listening to the teachers' voices as they are the key agents of the change. If the policy of learning reform is to be successful, intensive and consistent teacher development must be organised and sufficient resources must be allocated so that all schools, especially those in rural areas, can meet policy objectives.

7. NOTE

¹ Paper was presented at 26 Annual Thai TESOL International Conference, 19-21 January 2006, Chiang Mai, Thailand and also is available on the Conference CD.

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