

IMPLEMENTING A LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM AT THE FACULTIES OF ARTS FOR YEMENI STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

This paper aims at assessing the role of a "Learner-centred" curriculum in language teaching on the development of learner autonomy. It is argued in this paper that a foreign language course designed with a learner-centred focus not only helps learners increase their competence in the use of the language but also allows them to develop some strategies for 'learning how to learn'. This, in effect, promotes the development of learner autonomy and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and to become independent learners, the two important requirements of university education.

It might be worth mentioning that the curriculum of English, at the Yemeni universities-Faculties of Arts- in the northern governorates, was actually designed by early seventies for the Kuwaiti universities. At that time, Sana'a University was sponsored by the Kuwaiti government and as a result, the same syllabus was imposed on the Yemeni learners of English. This curriculum did not take into consideration the needs of the Yemeni learners of English, which are definitely different from those of the Kuwaiti learners. Moreover, this curriculum was designed long time back in accordance with the traditional approaches of the fifties and sixties, which view language as a system of rule-governed structures hierarchically arranged.

Bose (2004:23) is of the idea that the curriculum offered in the Faculties of Arts in the Yemeni universities, does not meet the needs of the learners, and hence need for re-thinking. He reflects his awareness of the problem by saying, "...the curriculum of the four year English course

offered in the Faculties of Arts in the Yemeni universities is dismally poor in its fulfilling the needs of the learners; it stuffs them with too much literature and linguistics and fails to equip them for their future life."

The following list is adopted from Bose (2004) of the courses taught in the Yemeni universities - Faculties of Arts - Departments of English:

Skill courses	Knowledge course	Literature course
Reading 1	Grammar 1	Lang. through litt.
Reading 2	Grammar 2	Analysis of Lit. text
Writing 1	Advance Grammar	Modern Eng. Prose
Writing 2	Int. to Linguistics	Eng. Lit: Hist. Prose
Speaking Eng. 1	Morph & Syntax	19th C. Am. Litt.
Speaking Eng. 2	Semantics	19th C. Poetry
Speaking Eng. 3	Applied Linguistics	19th C. Novel
Advance Comp.		19th C. Novel
Translation 1		20th C. Am. Litt.
Translation 2		20th C. Poetry
Translation 3		20th C. Novel
Advance Translation		20th C. Drama
Writing 3		History of English
		MET. & Aug. Poetry
		Elizabethan drama
		Literary criticism
		Rest. & Aug. drama
		Shakespeare
		Comparative Literature

In other words, the current curriculum needs to keep abreast with the changed views on the nature of language learning which have resulted in the emergence of a new teaching methodology, namely Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This new trend was defined by Richards and Rodgers (1986:71) as "a system for the expression of meaning, the primary function being interaction and communication."

Therefore, this paper develops the idea that if Yemeni learners of English take part in curriculum designing, this will increase their confidence in working on their own as well as learning to take responsibility for their own learning, which is the two demands of academic study in university education, in tune with the emerging trend mentioned above.

However, before going into the trend of Learner-centred communicative approach in language teaching, it might be useful to indicate briefly the main differences between "curriculum and syllabus", as within the ELT literature there is some confusion over these two terms.

Definition of Curriculum

The term curriculum is usually used in the sense to include all the factors, which contribute to the teaching and learning situation.

Robert K. Johnson (1989:1) states: "The word 'curriculum' is defined in a broad sense, to include all the relevant decision making processes of all the participants. The products of these decision making processes generally exist in some concrete form which can be observed and described: For example, policy documents, teaching materials and resources, and teaching and learning acts."

Nunan (1989:9) describes curriculum as: "... on the one hand it can be seen as a statement of intent, the "what should be" of a language programme as set out in syllabus outlines, a set of objectives, and various other planning documents. The other perspective is that of the curriculum as "reality" that is, in terms of what actually goes on from moment to moment in the language classroom.

Nunan (ibid: 14) is of the view that "Curriculum is a large and complex concept and the term 'curriculum' is used in a number of different ways. In some contexts, it is used to refer to a particular programme of study (for example the 'science curriculum' or the 'mathematics curriculum'). In other contexts, it is used more widely."

Definition of Syllabus

Widdowson (1987) sees that syllabus is simply a framework within which activities can be carried out: a teaching device to facilitate learning. It only becomes a threat to pedagogy when it is regarded as absolute rules for determining what is to be learned rather than points of reference from which bearings can be taken. Breen (1984) indicates that any syllabus will express-however indirectly certain assumptions about language, about the psychological process of learning, and about the pedagogic and social processes within a classroom.

However, it might be useful to clarify the distinction between curriculum and syllabus. Stern (1984) in Nunan (1988:5) indicates that "... I would like to draw attention to a distinction...between curriculum or syllabus, that is its content, structure, parts and organization, and...what in curriculum theory is often called curriculum processes, that is curriculum development, implementation, dissemination and evaluation. The former is concerned with the WHAT of curriculum: what the curriculum is like or should be like; the latter is concerned with the WHO and HOW of establishing the curriculum.

Candlin (1984) suggests that curricula are concerned with making general statements about language learning, purposes and experience, evaluation, and the role relationship of teachers and learners. According to Candlin, they will also contain banks of learning items and suggestions about how these might be used in class. Syllabi, on the other hand, are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation. These accounts can be used to make subsequent modifications to the curriculum, so that the developmental process is ongoing and cyclical.

Learner-centredness in curriculum development

Nunan (1989:19) comments on the birth of learner-centred approach. "...Another trend in recent years which has stemmed from CLT has been the development of learner-centred approaches to language teaching, in which information by and from learners is used in planning, implementing and evaluating language programmes. While the learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and process as traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information by and from learners will be built into every phase of the curriculum process. Curriculum development becomes a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners will be involved in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation." The definition of language learning by Richards and Rodgers (1986) indicates that there is a new role for learners, teachers and materials. With the emergence of this new methodology, learners are no longer considered as passive recipients of knowledge; they are viewed as active participants who are involved in various stages of teaching and learning.

To conclude, learning seems to take place most effectively when learners are actively involved in the learning process and not if teaching remains nothing more than teacher performance, and the tendency to pass on information to learners continues- as the case in the Faculties of Arts in Yemeni Universities at present.

Moreover, in a learner-centred curriculum, learners' needs analysis is regarded as the most crucial stage in the process of course design and therefore, it cannot be carried out successfully by anyone other than the learners themselves.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is used as the initial process for the specification of behavioural objectives, and from these objectives more detailed aspects of the syllabus such as functions, notions, hobbies, lexis and structural exponents are derived. Nunan (1988:45) indicates that "...needs analysis is a set of procedures for specifying the parameters of a course of study. Such parameters include the criteria and rationale for grouping learners, the selection and sequencing of course content, methodology, course length, intensity and duration."

In the learner-centred curriculum, learners play a major role in assessing their needs, as this is the corner stone and the starting point in the process of designing the syllabus and the learning situations in which they will need to use the target language. Richards (1984:5) suggests that "Needs analysis serves three main purposes: it provides a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of a language

programme; it can be used in developing goals, objectives and content, and it can provide data for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme."

Brindley (1984:31) addresses the issue of needs-based syllabus design from a rather different perspective, taking up a distinction made by

Richterich (1972) between objective and subjective needs: he says that the 'objective' needs are those which can be diagnosed by teachers on the basis of the analysis of personal data about learners along with information about their language proficiency and patterns of language use (using as a guide their own personal experience and knowledge, perhaps supplemented by Munby-type specifications of macro-skills), whereas the 'subjective' needs (which are often 'wants', 'desires', 'expectations', or other psychological manifestations of a lack) cannot be diagnosed as easily, or, in many cases, even stated by learners themselves.

Nunan (1988:44) draws a distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' needs analysis. He says, "Objective needs result in content specifications derived from an analysis of the target communicative situations in which learners are likely to find themselves. Being derived from an analysis of the target language situation, they can be carried out in the absence of the learner. Subjective needs, on the other hand, are derived from the learners themselves. While there is a tendency to equate objective needs with the specification of content, and subjective needs with the specification of methodology, the two need not be seen as synonymous."

If language teaching is to be geared around learners, then they need to be aware of their role in the process of course design. This should involve the development of their awareness in the following areas:

1. Self-awareness as a language learner. This relates to students' motivation to learn the language, the amount of effort they are willing to put in, and their attitudes both to the target language and to the process of learning itself.
 2. Awareness of learning goals. Here, students need to develop an understanding of why they are studying the target language, of their communicative goals and their current abilities in the language, together with the ability to analyze and discuss their goals.
 3. Awareness of learning options. This involves students acquiring an understanding of what language learning entails, of the various learning strategies, study options, and resources they can use, and of how different activities can advance learning—in both in-class and self-study contexts.
 4. Language awareness. Without having to become linguists, students need at least a basic idea of how language is structured and used—e.g. certain grammatical or functional categories, the ability to recognize formulaic expressions, some notions of register and appropriacy.
- Tudor (1993).

Gathering information about learner needs

The analysis of the learners' needs involves far more than simply identifying the linguistic features of the target situation. There are a number of ways in which information can be gathered about these needs. The most frequently used ones are:

- questionnaires;
- interviews;

- observation;
- data collection;
- informal consultations with learners.

The analysis of target situation needs is in essence a matter of asking questions about the target situation and the attitudes towards that situation of the various participants in the learning process.

However, the following questions can be used as a framework to analyze the actual needs of the learners of English in the Faculties of Arts of the Yemeni universities:

1. **Why** do learners study the target language?
2. **How** will learners use the target language?
3. **Who** will the learner use the target language with?
4. **Where** will the target language be used?
5. **When** will the target language be used?

There are some essential points that teachers should take into consideration while gathering information in order to ensure that the course is learner-centred. For example:

1. Meeting learners as individuals and groups.
2. Building in parental involvement: anticipating parents' reactions.
3. Openness and flexibility: being prepared to change planning.
4. Balancing learners wants and needs.

Bose (2004:28) identifies the needs of the Yemeni learners of English at the Faculties of Arts, which could be used as a starting point, while gathering information about learners' needs; they are as follows:

1. Vocational needs:
 - i. Using English as a tourist guide:
 - ii. Using English in Hotel Industry:
 - iii. Using English for media:
 - iv. Using English for teaching at higher level:
2. Academic needs:
 - i. Using English for higher education:
 - ii. Using English for successfully pursuing the course on hand:
3. Social needs: For communication with non-Arabic speaking visitors to Yemen, in jobs and other places.

In summary, needs analysis is a set of procedures for specifying the parameters of a course of study. Such parameters include the criteria and rationale for grouping learners, the selection and sequencing of course content, methodology, and course length, intensity and duration. In a learner-centred system, course designers will engage in

extensive consultation with the learners themselves in deriving parameters. Techniques for subjective needs analysis will, therefore, figure prominently as techniques for objective need analysis in such systems.

Criticism of Needs Analysis

However, the impracticality of expecting learners to adopt this new role immediately was also noted. Tudor (1996:34) is of the view that "The knowledge and personal qualities that learner involvement requires cannot be taken for granted, and need to be developed over time. A learner-centred approach needs, therefore, to contain an element of awareness development, which is designed to help learners deepen their understanding of language learning and develop their ability to play an active and self-directive role in their language study"

Terrell (1983) also criticized needs analysis. He is of the view that needs analysis, or indeed any other form of pre-course planning and specification is rather irrelevant because the planned curriculum will be transformed in its implementation. What really counts, therefore, in the development of second language skills is the process of engaging learners in interesting and meaningful classroom experiences.

However, Nunan, (1987) the defendant of this approach, says that "While one would not want to deny the importance of such experiences, it would seem that there is a better chance of these being interesting and meaningful, if they are related in some way to the purposes to which learners wish to put their language skills."

Thus, in order to help learners develop this ability of undertaking responsibilities for their own learning and work toward the goal of becoming autonomous learners, the concept of learner training was developed. Tudor (1996:37) defines this new concept as follows: "...Learner training could...be defined as the process by which learners are helped to deepen their understanding of the nature of language learning, and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to pursue their learning goals in an informed and self-directive manner."

As implied in the quotation above, the role of teachers in this new learning experience is to help students develop the necessary skills for becoming independent learners. Dickinson (1987:34) suggests that this can be achieved by providing learners with opportunities to practice language for communicative purposes: "...many teachers using such (communicative) methods are, consciously or not, involved in helping their students to learn how to learn." It is seen that teachers should start to adopt the role of "communication facilitators" instead of being the source of information, and materials are to be designed in such a way that they should promote the real-life uses of the language, which the learners are likely to experience in an authentic communication situation.

The role of teachers

In fact, the design of the course, by its nature requires much of the work to be done outside class and by the learners themselves. However, it is unrealistic to expect learners to confront this new learning experience on their own. The teachers' roles in the process of this work are those of a "planner", a "counsellor" and a "helper" in various stages.

They are "planners" in the sense that they are the ones who make decisions on how the work should be divided into manageable chunks and build on each other in a graded manner. In addition, they set the deadlines for the completion of each component as timing is an important factor in a work such as this and the majority of the students at

this level do not have such well-developed time –management skills. They are also "counsellors" as they constantly provide feedback and advice on the section of the work that the students have completed, within and outside the classroom during the tutorial sessions. They give feedback on various aspects of the students' work, such as its content, organization, grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, they are "helpers" as they develop the skills that are new to them as well as provide opportunities for guided-practice in class for the skills that the students will employ outside class, individually. They introduce research techniques and methods and give information on certain aspects of writing research projects, for example,

Richards and Rodgers (1986) suggest that learner roles are closely related to the function and status of the teacher. They point out that some methods are totally teacher dependent, while others view the teacher as a catalyst, consultant or guide. They (ibid: 24) point out that teacher roles are related to the following issues:

- the types of function teachers are expected to fulfill, e.g. whether that of practice director, counsellor or model
- the degree of control the teacher has over how learning takes place
- the degree to which the teacher is responsible for content
- the interactional patterns that develop between teachers and learners.

Problems are likely to occur when there is a mismatch between the role perceptions of the teacher and the learner. For example, it is not uncommon in adult ESL (English as a Second Language) class for the teacher to see himself as a guide and catalyst for classroom communication while the learners see him as someone who should be providing explicit instruction and modelling the target language.

Al-Maktari (2002) is of the view that the teacher is still important even in a learner-centred approach." It is true that this is the age of the individual whether he is an ordinary man or a student...But this does not mean that the teacher is no more important. It is only a matter of different roles to be played by both agents, the teacher and the learner."

This emphasizes the point mentioned earlier that though the learner is the centre and the main focus of learner-centred approach, the teacher is still seen as the corner stone in facilitating the learning process.

Breen and Candlin (1980) support this idea and see that the role of teachers and learners are, in many ways, complementary. Giving the learners a different role (such as greater initiative in the classroom) requires the teacher to adopt a different role. According to Breen and Candlin (ibid), the teacher has three main roles in the communicative classroom. The first is to act as a facilitator of the communicative process, the second is to act as a participant, and the third is to act as an observer and learner.

Content Selection

Ideally, in a learner-centred approach, content should be selected through negotiation with learners, as the chief concern is the learners' need.

In other words, the content should be selected on the basis of the data derived from the learners at the initial planning stage as a starting point.

However, there are many possible starting points for deriving course content: The first step in the process is to examine learner data and extract information relating to the purpose for which learners are attending the course and which can be translated into

communicative goals. For example, Nunan (1988:62) proposes some sort of goals, which are commonly expressed by the learners as follows:

" I would like to be able to:

- talk to my neighbours
- find out about Australian culture
- read newspaper
- understand TV and radio
- fill out forms
- read signs and notices
- talk to my daughter's teacher
- read stories in English to my grandchildren
- undertake tertiary study in English
- understand people in the workplace."

Rowntree (1982:31) divides the steps into "informal (or intuitive) approaches and systematic (or analytical) approaches. He says:

"Broadly speaking, the intuitive approaches are those that give us most help in thinking up possible content in the first place. The analytical techniques, on the other hand, tend to be most useful, once we have generated a few ideas and are ready to see how they hang together and can be extended. In reality, of course, we are thinking both intuitively and analytically at all stages of course planning. Sometimes one predominates, however, and sometimes the other."

Rowntree (ibid: 35) suggests that an approach for content specifications includes:

- sitting and reviewing one's own knowledge of the proposed subject
- asking other teachers and subject-matter experts
- analysing similar courses elsewhere
- reviewing textbooks aimed at students working at about the same level as ours will be
- reading the advanced books and scholarly articles on the subject
- asking prospective students what they would like to see the course include:
- discussing with students their existing conceptions of, and attitudes to, the key concepts of the subject matter
- choosing books (or other source material) around which the course will be organized
- thinking of essential activities that students need to engage in as part of the course
- considering how student's attainment on the course might most sensibly be assessed."

Nunan (1989:132) indicates a significant method for selecting materials for the good communicative lesson. He says, "The good communicative lesson will:

- derive input from authentic sources
- involve learners in problem-solving activities in which they are required negotiate meaning
- incorporate tasks which relate to learners' real-life communicative needs
- allow learners choices in what, how and when to learn
- allow learners to rehearse, in class, real-world language tasks
- require learners and teachers to adopt a range of roles, and use language in a variety of settings in and out of the classroom

- expose learners to the language as system
- encourage learners to develop skills in learning how to learn
- integrate the four macroskills
- provide controlled practice in enabling microskills (reading, listening, speaking and writing)
- involve learners in creative language use."

After the content has been specified, it needs to be sequenced or graded as this is an essential stage. Rowntree (1981:106) explains the importance of sequencing the content. He says, "Our interest in sequence arises because the student cannot learn everything at once. If he is to learn A and B, he must either learn A and then B, or B first and then A. Unless he can learn a little bit of B and then B (but how much and in what order?)..."

But these may not be equally viable alternatives. For any given student, one of these sequences may be better- more 'learnable' than others...So, in enquiring about sequence, we are really asking whether one way of ordering the content of a course will be more hopeful, educationally, than any other possible order."

Learner-centred curriculum also gives great attention to the method of teaching that will be adopted by teachers. That means, the selected methodology by teachers should involve the interaction between learners and the context of learning.

Methodology

Since teachers are more concerned with day-to-day aspects of teaching, they tend to be more interested in the methodological considerations.

So, if teachers are to take active part in curriculum development, they would not only deal with "what" to teach but also throw light on "how" to teach. Therefore, methodology, in other words, could be implementation of curriculum and teaching practice should focus on the needs of the learners and usually the learners' needs for the language are for communicative purposes.

Thus, real-life, psycholinguistically -motivated, pedagogic tasks would be more appreciated as such methodology has the general support of the learners themselves. However, one of the main concerns of learner-centred approach is finding the better or suitable teaching method; this undoubtedly has improved many aspects of language teaching practice and has enriched the range of methodological options from which teachers can choose. For example, in a learner-centred approach, every teaching situation involves the interaction between a given teaching method, the students, and the wider sociocultural context of learning. If this interaction is not a happy one, learning is unlikely to be effective, no matter how good the teaching method is. Therefore, the teaching method needs to be chosen not only on the basis of what seems theoretically plausible, but also in the light of the experience, personality, and expectations of the students involved.

Learner-centredness in the choice of methodology is more complex than in goal setting. Some learners certainly do have greater familiarity with their communicative needs than their teachers do, whereas relatively few will know more about language teaching methodology.

"Adopting a learner-centred approach to the choice of methodology will thus generally operate in two stages. In the first, the teacher must get to know students on a number of

counts, though in particular with respect to their preferred learning style and their attitudes to or experience of language learning. On this basis, the teacher must use his or her professional judgement to select a teaching-learning mode that seems likely to hit the right chord with students. The second stage involves students participating actively in the planning of their learning programme. This, however, needs preparation. To begin with, the teacher has to encourage students to think critically about their learning experiences and about themselves as learners." (Tudor 1993)

Evaluation

Evaluation is a crucial component of the curriculum. We can never think of a curriculum without evaluation. Teachers have an important role to play in course evaluation, if they are to be curriculum developers. Evaluation should encompass the learners' outcomes, causes of learners' difficulties and possible remediation. For example, observing learners' activities in the classroom and participating in discussions can enable teachers to judge how effective the course content and methodology are. So, this feedback can help teachers to adjust their plans according to the needs of the learners. However, Gronlund (1981) in Nunan (1988:119) is of the view that "Evaluation may be defined as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils. There are two important aspects of this definition. First, note that evaluation implies a systematic process, which omits casual, uncontrolled observation of pupils. Second, evaluation assumes that instructional objectives have been previously identified. Without previously determined objectives, it is difficult to judge clearly the nature and extent of pupils' learning."

Al-Maktari (2002:137) sees that evaluation is an important aspect. He says that "Self-evaluation as a learner-centred evaluative technique is to be promoted. This can be by providing learners with skills in evaluating materials, learning activities and their own achievement of objectives. In this way, evaluation will be built into the teaching process."

As a matter of fact, evaluation is considered as an essential element in learner-centred curriculum. Therefore, learners should be encouraged to take part in the process of evaluating of their progress. Such evaluation will assist in the development of a critical self-consciousness by learners of their roles as active agents within the learning process.

Coombe (2002) suggests an 'Alternative Assessment' which emphasizes learners' performance in authentic learning contexts and greater learner autonomy. A key part of alternative assessment is that the student is actively involved in documenting progress towards language development. This kind of assessment can be used to assess the various stages of curriculum design. The alternative assessment can be, for example:

1. Self-assessment: this assessment enables learners to monitor their own progress in a language programme. It refers to the student's evaluation of his or her own performance at various points in a course. The advantage of self-assessment is that learners' awareness of outcomes and progress is enhanced.
2. Portfolio Assessment: this assessment is based on some collections assembled by both teacher and student of representative samples of on-going work over a period of

time. The best portfolios are more than a scrapbook; they contain a variety of work in various stages and utilize multiple media.

3. Student-designed Tests: in this assessment, learners are required to write tests on course material. This process results in greater learner awareness of course content, test formats, and test strategies. Student-designed tests are good practice and review activities that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

4. Learner-centred assessment: this assessment advocates using input from learners in many areas of testing. For example, students can select the themes, formats and marking schemes to be used. Involving learners in the aspects of classroom testing results in reduced test anxiety and greater student motivation.

To conclude, evaluation is seen as an essential element in any curriculum process and particularly that claims to be based on learner-centred approach. Learners should also be encouraged to take part in the process of evaluating their progress. Such evaluation will assist in the development of critical self-consciousness by learners of their role as active agents within the learning process, which is considered as the main goal of the learner-centred curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper aims at assessing the role of 'learner-centred' curriculum in language teaching for the development of learners of English at the Faculties of Arts. It is emphasized in this paper that learner-centred approach promotes learner autonomy, as it is designed in accordance with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching.

Another argument presented in this paper is that learner-centred curriculum adds a number of responsibilities to the learners, which are not normally found in the traditional approaches. These responsibilities help learners to develop some learning strategies related to the process of learning, which they can employ in their further education.

However, learner-centredness is not a method, nor can it be reduced to a set of techniques. In the first instance, it involves recognition of learners' potential to contribute meaningfully to the shaping of their learning programme, and then a willingness to accommodate this potential as far as the situation will realistically allow.

Furthermore, for a learner-centred curriculum to work well, learners will have to learn more than just the target language. They will need to learn about how language is structured and used and about themselves as language learners. This is very clearly stated by Rodgers quoted in Dickinson (1987:34), who says, "The man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security." Thus, in addition to a given level of language competence, learners should leave a course with a better understanding of language and of themselves as both language users and language learners. This is clearly an educated product, and helping learners to acquire it can be very rewarding for teachers in both personal and professional terms.

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