Student-Centered Language Appropriation: A Study of Classroom Practices in the Adult ESL Classroom at the University of California, San Diego

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Abstract. *This study discusses research which was undertaken in the author's country of residence, San Diego, CA. It was conducted because the researcher saw a need to better define the concept of 'student-centered learning' in the ESL teaching profession in an effort to help both new teachers to the field, and experienced teachers, make their teaching practices more student-centered. In this study, two adult ESL classes were asked to give their opinions on two specific classroom practices. The first practice involved the students discussing and negotiating the course content with the teacher. The second practice involved the students discussing and negotiating the course evaluative criteria with the teacher. The advantage of performing this research is to find out if students prefer to have the opportunity to give their input on such areas as course content and evaluative criteria. Discovering that they do prefer these practices demonstrates the need for more student control in an ESL classroom and leads us to adapting these practices with more confidence in the hopes of encouraging more meaningful learning experiences for our adult ESL learners and promote student-centered language appropriation.*

Keywords: Student-Centered, Language Appropriation, Classroom Practices, Student Control

Introduction

A little over a decade ago many teachers believed that student-centered teaching meant, primarily, that the students talked or *participated* more than the teacher did. The *quantity* of teacher talk time and its relationship to student-centered teaching was not clearly substantiated. Certainly student-centered teaching was not merely about how much students talked. So what practices encompass student-cetered teaching in an adult ESL classroom? Through a discussion of student-centered learning, self-directed learning, and the coined term student-centered language appropriation, we can conclude that most adult students do benefit from the opportunity of having more control in an ESL classroom.

Purpose of Study

The significance of this study is in identifying concrete classroom practices that support student-centered learning and make the acquisition of language, language learning strategies, and information about language more meaningful to the learner. This is achieved by finding out how adult learners feel when provided with more control and choice in the classroom, namely with regards to course content and evaluative criteria.

Research Questions

In this study, the following questions were examined:

1. To what extent do adult ESL students feel comfortable with taking part in, with the aid of the teacher, determining course content?
2. To what extent to adult ESL students feel comfortable with taking part in, with the aid of the teacher, determining the course evaluation methods?
3. To what extent will the responses of adult ESL students who have experienced determining course content and evaluation methods differ from students who have not had this experience?

Literature Review

To properly address issues surrounding adult learning in an ESL classroom, it is important to first note the significance of the adragogical model. The andragogical model contains two streams of inquiry: scientific and artistic or intuitive/reflective. The scientific stream tries to discover new knowledge via investigation, often experimental in nature, and was begun by Thorndike in 1928 with the publication of his book *Adult Learning*. The artistic stream is more concerned with how adults learn as it attempts to discover new knowledge through intuition and the analysis of experience. This stream of inquiry began with Lindeman's book *The Meaning of Adult Education* in 1926. Lindeman believed that it is through the consideration of situations, not subjects, that adult education should be approached. Curriculum should be built around a students' needs and interests, rather than forcing students to comply with a pre-established curriculum or plan. Adult education begins with the student's current situation with respect to his family, his job, his community, his experiences (both past and present). Textbooks and teachers are secondary as the primary importance is with the learners' experiences and what they bring to the classroom. Essentially, if education is life, then life is also education.Experience is the adult learners' living textbooks (p.37).

Therefore, rigid educational practices have no place in adult education. To refer again to Morris, choice and decision making are paramount to the appropriation of knowledge and therefore to learning itself (1966).

Adult education should be defined then, as Lindeman puts it, as a progression through which. learners become conscious of significant experience. Identification of this significant experience leads to an evaluation of it. Meanings accompany experience when we know what is happening and what importance the event includes for our personalities (1926, 169).

It would rightly follow that if the students in the andragogical modle are different from the typical student, then the teachers in the model must be different as well. Gessner (1956) writes of Lindeman that the teacher of adult learners no longer fulfills the role of 'all-knowing' as does the teacher in the traditional pedagogical role, but rather is the guide who also participates in learning. Information from different sources are utilized not for the purpose of mere accumulation but in order to solve problems that are relevant to the learners. Lindeman defines adult education as a cooperative venture that is not authoritarian and focuses on the meaning of experience which may call into play our preconceptions about life. Gessner quotes Lindeman, "None but the humble become good teachers of adults". The student's experience is as important as the teacher's knowledge in an adult classroom and authority is shared by the students and the teacher (p. 166). Teachers should not derive their value from the amount of knowledge they have to offer their students, but we should really reframe our value (i.e. our self worth at work) in terms of how much we help our students accomplish their goals.

Lindeman (1926) is not comparing adults to children but conventional adult learning to adults. He makes the following five assumptions about adult learners:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy

Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered. Therefore, adult learning should be organized around life situations, not simply subjects

2. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning. Therefore, analysis of experience is the core methodology

3. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing. Therefore, there should not be a transmission of knowledge from teacher to student but an engagement of mutual inquiry

4. Individual differences among people increase with age. Therefore, such elements as style, time, place, and pace of learning must be taken into account with adult learners.

By holding these assumptions to be true means that the elements of choice and decision-making become even more important for the adult learner. It means that the students must be given the freedom to make decisions in the classroom that can best satisfy their needs since as teachers we cannot fully know our students in a way that would allow us to make these decisions for them. In a sense, teachers must be willing to give up the power of being at the center of the classroom experience since this power is often a result of being the one who makes the decisions. So by giving up the power

of being the decision-maker, we have to delegate it to someone else—either the students or the administration. As students are the source of their own experience, it makes sense to give it to them, which in turn, will help stimulate mutual inquiry by both student and teacher alike.

Mackaye (1931), director of the Department of Adult Education in San Jose California says that a good adult educator is one who presents intelligent arguments regarding her beliefs and feels comfortable to have – may even rejoice in - the students disagreeing with or ridiculing these beliefs. There is a mutual respect that allows this condition to exist in a harmonious classroom learning experience (p. 293-294). So the giving up of power on the teacher's part does not mean that the teacher no longer shares what they believe or gives suggestions on how to best achieve a result. Rather, it means being open to students disagreeing with you and not feeling threatened by theories and analogies that oppose your ideas. How does a teacher do this?

Tough (1979) describes four characteristics of the perfect classroom helper or facilitator:

- They accept the learners as they are and feel a genuine concern and love towards them
- They do not wish to interfere with the learner's capacity for self-planning
- They see themselves as equals with the learners
- They seek to learn from the activities in the classroom and are open to change and new experiences.

Brundag and Mackeracher (1980) stress the significance of a true facilitator to be flexible, responsive to learner needs and ready to use the learners' experiences in teaching activities. Brockett (1983a), in a similar fashion, identifies "attending, responding, and understanding" as the key elements for a teacher as facilitator of self-directed learning.

Cherrington, chief of the Division of Cultural Relations, United States Department of State in the *Journal of Adult Education* wrote that in democratic adult education spontaneity is welcome and a key concept is 'free'; free choice of subject matter and free choice in determining outcomes. Individual critical thinking is the norm (1939, 244-245). So even in a class where adult learners are not equally happy to be there, by providing them with the freedom to choose subject matter and to determine student learning outcomes we can make the learning experience one that is worthwhile, educational, and even enjoyable!

However, as the assistant director, Fields (1940), of Evening Schools, Board of Education in New York City said, it is not just about course content, but teaching methodology. There should be a lot of student participation such as with activities like discussions, debates, and forums and less lecture style teaching (Journal of Adult Education, p. 44-45). So even students who choose a course with content that is less desirable then they had hoped, and even if the teacher is powerless to change the content due to the program's regulations or otherwise, by changing how the content is explored can make all the difference in how the students perceive and experience the class.

Whether it's called andragogy or adult education, it is basically "the understanding of the position of a grown person in the process of education" (Savicevic, 1998, 116). Houle notes that what is most important is that through andragogy educators realize that they should involve the learners "in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn" (1996, 30).

It is difficult to talk extensively about concepts of andragogy without addressing the area of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) was introduced around the same time as andragogy was introduced to North America. Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning "as a process in which individuals take the initiative in designing learning experiences, diagnosing needs, locating resources, and evaluating learning". Similarily, Tough (1966) defined self-teaching as a situation where the learner takes the responsibility to plan and direct their course of learning. Both of these definitions seem to loudly insist on a level of individualism or autonomy in self-directed learning. Autonomy seems to be a standing theme when one wishes to discuss elements of self-directed learning, and so Moore (1980) went on to define the autonomous learner as one who is capable of identifying their learning needs and goals and creating criteria in which to evaluate them.

Self-directed learners are not methodological experts who can easily create learning objectives and goals without the help of other influences. Rather, Strong (1977) best describes autonomous or

self-directed learners as decision-makers who make informed choices about possible activities that may aid them in pursuit of their personal goals. These decision-makers consider the different possibilities available to them based on their understanding and knowledge of the situation then they make choices. Being autonomous and having control over the techniques of learning are not one in the same. Chene (1983) helps to shed light on this by saying that autonomy is possible only when learners have an awareness of the process of learning, as well as the limitations and characteristics of the area being explored, of which they can make critical judgments. So once the limits of possible choices are recognized and the learner has developed the capacity to make judgments then the learner may become known as an autonomous learner.

In student-centered classrooms, students are directly involved and invested in the discovery of their own knowledge. Through collaboration and cooperation with others, students engage in experiential learning which is genuine, holistic, and exigent. Students are encouraged to use prior knowledge to create new learning. Students reflect on their thinking through the development of the metacognitive process. Metacognition is thinking about your thinking. In order for students to be metacognitive they must know how and know the need to think about their thinking. In a student-centered classroom, teachers facilitate opportunities for students to be metacognitive. Teachers in learner-centered schools understand learning to be a self-regulated, ongoing process of making sense of the world through concrete experience, collaborative discourse, and reflection. Teachers can assist students to acquire a set of strategies, define goals, and monitor their progress. Providing opportunities for students to reflect on what and how they learn creates an environment where students take responsibility for their learning and become more of a partner with their teacher in engaging in meaningful learning experiences.

Facilitation of a student-centered classroom is a key characteristic of effective instruction. Student-centered classrooms can be linked to Piaget, Dewey and Vygotsky. “Piaget explored the process by which humans construct their knowledge of the world, and Dewey emphasized the learner’s interaction with the physical environment. Vygotsky developed the role of social interaction as a dimension of learning” (Rallis, 1995, 225).

Qualities of a student-centered classroom are talked about as early as the beginning of the 1900s. Educators J. Brooks and M. Brooks describe the value of allowing student responses to steer lessons and create instructional strategies. They recommend asking questions and leading students to solutions rather than simply giving answers, with the goal of nurturing students’ natural curiosity (Brown, 2008, p. 1). This is, at least, one concrete example of how a teacher or facilitator can practice student-centered learning in the classroom.

The following outlines what should be the focus for student-centered teaching practices:

- Make learning high-interest and personalized…“If students are introduced to topics that interest them, they’re more likely to be motivated” (Jones, 1982).
- Understand that “students and teachers are partners in a caring relationship and be willing to be co-learners and co-creators of learning experiences” (McCombs & Miller, 2007, 110).
- Student-centered teachers plan with an emphasis on the knowledge of who their learners are both individually and collectively and are armed with the best available knowledge about learning and about the best teaching practice (McCombs & Miller, 2007). Teachers experiment with different approaches to learning to enable each different learning style.
- Constructing ideas or systems is interactive. (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). “Learner-centered teachers recognize that knowledge construction is not entirely an individual process…The teachers question and probe to help the learners make meaning. They listen carefully, encouraging reflection and stimulating new connections and interpretations” (Rallis, 1995, 226). “The teacher’s role is more that of a facilitator than instructor; the students are active participants in the learning process. The teacher helps to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process” (Jones, 2007, 2).
- For collaborative group work to have an impact, teachers must design effective learning tasks. The tasks must have clear outcomes and be interdependent among the students. The teacher needs to

carefully monitor activities and give constant feedback. (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

• Performance assessments are those involving students in activities, which require them to demonstrate mastery of certain performance skills or their ability to create products that meet certain standards of quality (Stiggins, 2001).

Ultimately, the primary goal of student-centered classrooms is to help students become independent. By keeping students at the center of one's classroom, a teacher can encourage and inspire students to seek out knowledge and to strive for understanding at a deeper level. Through this process, students see a greater relevance for and a stronger connection to the subject at hand. Through student-centered instruction, our students can achieve independent minds and the capacity to make educational decisions and value judgments (Brown, 1971).

Student-centered learning and self-directed learning and two terms essential to the field of education and to educators in particular. The defining of these terms is of such importance that for over 100 years researchers and scholars have been trying to offer a clearer and more descriptive – not just prescriptive – analysis of what teachers need to do to promote learning in the classroom. And, in doing so, we are provided with a view of education and educational practices - namely pedagogy and andragogy -that is helping to shape the beliefs and, thus, classroom practices being demonstrated in classrooms around the world. And it is this attempt at defining what works in the classroom that instigated the coining of a new term, student-centered language appropriation. It is meant to refer to the true ownership and internalization of language made possible by the student's active participation in their language learning. It is a term specific to the kind of language activities and methods used in adult second language acquisition. A balance between student-centered learning and self-directed learning where the learners control is not as limited as in student-centered learning but is not as wide open as in self-directed learning. The teacher does not take a peripheral role but an active role in working with the students to promote accuracy and fluency, and also to encourage student choice and accountability. Goals are set with the help of the teacher only if the students choose to create them. Standards for achievement are created by the students and the teacher together and evaluation occurs on two levels: via the teacher and via themselves and/or their peers.

What it means to learn and to appropriate knowledge is an area of teaching that teachers must always pursue as our ultimate goal is always to teach so that others can learn.

Research Design

The research design is qualitative. The majority of data came from individual interviews with students from two separate groups: students in case study 1 who will experience what it feels like to give their opinion about course content and evaluative criteria and will then be asked to talk about that experience; and, students in case study 2 who will be asked if they would like to give their opinion on these areas, but will not actually experience it in their classroom. Eight students from each group were met with individually for about 30 minutes in the middle of (week 4 or 5) the quarter. The questions for both case study 1 and case study 2 were the same, except that case study 2's questions were phrased as hypothetical. Second interviews were conducted on several of the students in weeks 9 and 10 of the quarter to follow up on some of the answers given during the first interviews.

In addition to the individual interviews, the students from both groups had a program determined class questionnaire administered to them in week 9 of the quarter. While the questionnaire is anonymous, it asked questions directly related to the course content and teaching methodologies in the class which was worthwhile data for this research.

Data Collection

The researcher began gathering data from the first day of class in both case study 1 and case study 2 via field notes. During the negotiation of course content and evaluative criteria with case study 1, the researcher noted everything that the students wrote down on the whiteboard for discussion as well as any other observations she made during the discussion.

All individual interviews with both case study 1 and case study 2 were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. The semi-structured questionnaire was the main instrument used in collecting data. The reliability of the questionnaire is solid as the researcher went through several steps to ensure its credibility: two books on qualitative research were read, a varied list of questions were taken down, several different sets of questions were developed, and these different sets were discussed with a veteran teacher/researcher of 20 years to determine the least 'leading' questions. In addition, all interviews were recorded. Follow up interviews were conducted with approximately 30% of case study 1 participants. The final questionnaires were administered and collected during the final week of the quarter.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and then coded and sub-coded for analysis by the researcher. The results of the analysis were presented in tabular form. Results of the questionnaires were examined for similarities and differences.

Results and Discussion

The data accumulated in this research is, as it is with any qualitative study, immense. Through the coding and sub-coding of data received emerging trends were identified, some of which were not expected and some of which were the driving force for this research.
The data is presented in tabular form as much as possible to allow the reader to clearly recognize the results presented by the researcher. However, in many areas narration is utilized to ensure that the reader has fully understood the tables and figures displaying the results.

Response to the Research Questions

The results that emerged upon analyzing the coding and sub-coding of the data revealed that age and experience accounted highly for how comfortable the students felt taking part in the discussion of course content and evaluative criteria.
The results of the interviews and questionnaires were as follows:

1. *Adult ESL students did feel comfortable with taking part in, with the aid of the teacher, determining course content when they have had experience in educational settings (e.g. in graduate school classes) with instructors who introduced a more student-centered approach.*

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Perceived Attitudes toward the Negotiating of the Course Content with Instructor by Age Range of Interviewee (case study 1 and case study 2 combined)

Age	Positive Attitude	Negative Attitude	# of Participants
18-22	1(14%)	6(86%)	7(44%)
23-33	8(89%)	1(11%)	9(56%)

Note: Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest .5%

2. Adult ESL students did feel comfortable with taking part in, with the aid of the teacher, determining the course evaluation methods when they have had experience in educational settings (e.g. in graduate school classes) with instructors who introduced a more student-centered approach.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Perceived Attitudes toward the Negotiating of the Course Evaluative Criteria with Instructor by Age Range of Interviewee (case study 1 and case study 2 combined)

Age	Positive Attitude	Negative Attitude	# of Participants
18-22	0 (0%)	7 (100%)	7 (44%)
23-33	8 (89%)	1 (11%)	9 (56%)

Note: Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest .5%

3. The responses of adult ESL students who have experienced determining course content and evaluation methods did not greatly differ from students who have not had this experience.

It appears that even if students had never experienced the opportunity to negotiate course content and evaluation methods with an instructor they still had strong feelings about wanting to. This leads us to believe that there have been other experiences in the students' lives that allow them now to feel that these decisions are ones they would feel comfortable making, if given the opportunity. These same experiences are perhaps what the younger students, age 18-22, have not yet had and may be what is preventing them from feeling more comfortable about having this degree of control and responsibility in an adult ESL classroom. Unfortunately, the data collected does not conclusively state that any one particular experience is necessary for learners to feel more comfortable with a higher level of control and choice in the classroom. However, it is worth noting in Table 3 that many students made reference to not having experienced any other teaching style other than lecture and this draws a correlation between what the older (23-33 year old) students may have in terms of experience vs. the younger students.

Table 3: Students Experience with Lecture and Non-Lecture Style Teaching Methodologies

Age	Experience with a style other than lecture	Only experience with lecture style	# of Participants
18-22	2(29%)	5(71%)	7(44%)
23-33	9(100%)	0 (0%)	9(56%)

Note: Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest .5%

Recommendations

Although this research seems to suggest that younger adult learners who have less experience with anything other than lecture style teaching methodology may not always feel positively about having more control and choice in the classroom, it is important to note that their lack of experience seems to be the reason for this – not the experience of having more control and choice in and of itself. In other words, perhaps the first time any learner feels what it is like to be given the opportunity to give his or her opinion in a classroom environment, knowing that he or she may help to decide on some crucial aspects of the course, is an intimidating experience. Perhaps it is only after the experience has occurred, and the learner has had time to reflect on it, that he or she can look back on the event and make judgments on its validity and consequence to their learning.

It is therefore a valid recommendation to pursue this area of research and include, if possible, a follow-up interview with the participants. It would be intriguing to find out how the younger participants would respond to the interview questions after another year or two of 'adult' education, whether it is in the area of ESL or graduate school. Naturally there would be no guarantee that they would be exposed to teaching styles that would reflect those utilized in this research, but based on how the other participants in this study responded it is a safe guess to say that with time there comes a variety of experiences. And it is more likely that in the ESL world of teaching, and in graduate or post graduate studies, students are exposed to a greater variety of teaching methodologies.

In the end, should teachers give adult learners more opportunity for choice by negotiating the course content and evaluative criteria in the classroom? The answer is yes if it promotes a feeling of mutual respect and increases a learner's level of motivation. And this research suggests that, in most cases, these practices do just that.

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