

Implementing Student-Centered Learning Method in English as a Second Language Classrooms in Sri Lankan Universities - Challenges

Student –Centred Learning Approach

The concept learner-centered is traditionally related to student teaching (Ulmer, 1969). Though, “it is not defined in Dewey's work, there exists a clear link from learner-centeredness to the concept of learning through experience (Delaney, 1999) and Rogers (1969) later notion of student-centered learning”. Renandya and Power (2016) state that a set of teaching and learning strategies deliberated to facilitate and encourage students to be active in the classroom such as; collaborating with the teacher and other peers and relating critical thinking and problem-solving skills in classroom. In student-centered learning, students are accountable of their learning, while the role of a teacher is to facilitate the teaching process (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Definitions of learner-centered learning are based on group activities and teaching methods in the classroom and focus on the conditions under which learner-centeredness occurs. Early definitions emphasize learner control (Lytle, Belzer, Schultz & Vannozzi, 1989) and learner needs as the central consideration of "the ways in which we schedule classes, choose materials, deliver instruction, and integrate technology" (Soifer, Young & Irwin, 1989, p.65-68). However, the point of reference for learner-centeredness is that is different from what has existed previously in education; a shift from traditional education to modern that mixtures all that is considered as learner-centered (Smith & Kolosick, 1996).

McCombs and Whistler (1997) define learner-center that focuses on both the learner and learning: The perspective that links a focus on individual learners (their experiences, perspectives, attitudes, backgrounds, talents, behaviours, interests, capacities, and requirements) with a focus on learning. The focuses then influence and drive educational decision making. The learner-centered perspective is a reflection of the learner-centered psychological principles in the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all. ‘Traditionalists feel that the move toward a more inclusive curriculum has led to a

decline in the quality of programs within universities, while progressivists welcome such a move (Nemec, 1997). Within the academy the demand to hear the voice of learners comes from several sources including the senates and boardrooms, but Graff (1992) contends that the undergraduate student voice has been essentially ignored in the debate over curriculum reform’.

Student-centered learning focuses on the learner and the teacher acts a facilitator assisting students in order to gaining knowledge (Hawker, 2000). When students’ diversity is considered in the learning process and supported by an comprehensive environment, their learning becomes applicable to them and holds more meaning, which may cause students to be more motivated and engaged in learning (Yilmaz, 2008). In addition, Gibson (2006) found that the teachers can design lessons authentic and connect them to students’ real life experiences which gives students the opportunity to actively construct and acquire knowledge as they connect their prior experiences with the new information they learned.

Literature Review

Since the concept was introduced to the academic field, various researchers found the impact of student-centred learning in small group activities. In this view, Barraket (2005) states that the shift toward student-centredness through the use of interactive small group activities based on primary resources appears to have significantly enhanced students’ learning in this case. He emphasizes that the student-centred learning is an effective method in small group activities in a classroom. Further, Amparo Vedula-Dinagsao and Maria Angeles Dano-Hinosolango (2014) also emphasizes an impact on learner-centered teaching to students’ learning skills and strategies that was highly significant. In addition, Yucel Gelisli (2009) relates the success was significantly higher in the group where student centered methods were applied compared to the teacher centered groups. Moreover, Rogers and Freiberg (1999) suggest that such a shift requires teachers to adopt a person-centered, rather than a teacher-centered, orientation toward classroom management, which features shared leadership, community building, and a balance between the needs of teachers and students. Rutledge (2008) exposes that the effectiveness of student-centered, “active learning strategies in

promoting meaningful learning, retention of content, improved student attitude and the development of critical thinking skills”.

DiCamillo (2012) emphasizes that moving towards student-centered practices increases the control students have in their learning because learning is active, uses primary sources, higher order thinking skills, and allows students to have a hand in developing learning goals, making decisions in the pacing to achieve such goals, and how it will be determined that learning has taken place. In this perspective, the teacher must provide students-centred activities and facilitate them to achieve the goals of learning.

Challenges in Implementing Student-Centred Approach

Although many previous researches suggest and recommend student-centered learning environment positively, this article focuses on number of challenges in implementing the student-centered method in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Sri Lankan universities due to traditional lecture hall settings, higher number of students in classes, inadequate learning inputs and lack of human resources in the ESL classrooms in Sri Lankan universities.

Traditional Lecture Hall Settings

A classroom setting is the first and the foremost aspect that influences in teaching and learning process. The success of education is based on the modern and updated classrooms that employ contemporary teaching and learning methods. In this view, student –centred classroom settings which is arranged for small group-based activities, in which students actively involve in learning, teachers play the role of facilitator, monitor, manager, guide, mentor and controller in the classroom differ from traditional classrooms, in which tables, chairs and other settings are fixed in order to conduct teaching activities by teachers. National Research and Evaluation Centre (2003) also reveal as follows: “... large tiered lecture theatres with fixed seats and tables...”. Although, the impact of student-centered learning method was initiated at universities in Sri Lanka, the classrooms are still remaining its traditional setting where a large number of students attend for lectures and lecturers deliver

lectures form a stage using multimedia projectors and microphones. In this perspective, Rasika, D.G.L (2018) finds the techniques used by the lecturers such as quizzes, team-based learning, mind mapping and buzz groups were rarely used in Sri Lankan universities. As the result of the traditional lecture hall settings, academic staff tend to use lecturing as their predominant teaching and learning approach. In this sense, implementing student – centred learning is very challenging for lecturers and the learners.

On the other hand, if the number of students is low and a lecturer implements student-centred learning method, he/she needs to request learners to arrange and rearrange classroom setting from traditional (teacher-centred) to learner-centred before and after classes. This situation creates some problems with other lecturers who prefer traditional lecture hall “Difficulty to change attitudes of some traditional lecturers” (Rasika, D.G.L 2018) and other minor staff who maintain classrooms. In addition, many lecturers and students consider the students centred classes are not serious lecturing method, because implementing student-centred learning without proper classroom settings creates much noise in arranging classrooms and negative feedback from students, other lectures against the lecturer who practices the student-centred classes in ESL classes at the universities. Moreover, most of the ESL lectures are conducted in other lecture halls of other departments due to lack of lecture hall facilities in the English Language Teaching departments or units. Sometimes, if there are not sufficient fixed lecture hall for ESL classes, these classes are conducted under trees as well. This situation is a big challenge for lecturers and learners to implement and practice students-centred learning at the universities.

Large Number of Students

According to Barraket (2005), implementing student-centered learning is highly challenging among large number of students in one classroom. “Number of students in all lectures in the first year is too high therefore it is difficult to do individual or group assignments” (Rasika, D.G.L, 2018). “Even though a lot of discussions, workshops and training programmes are conducted through several projects on this concept, there is no evidence for it being adopted by higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Nor are there any evaluations of the outcomes of the approach, where the Student Centred Learning is practised at a smaller scale” (Navaz, AMM

2014). In this view, teacher-centred classes are employed in a major scale rather than student-centred method in the ESL classes in the higher education sectors. Hence, the aims of the discussion, workshop and training programmes which are conducted through several projects on this concept are not been achieved. In addition, National Research and Evaluation Centre (2003) also reveals that the concept of Student Centred Education were not been implemented successfully. The concept has not been initiated in the universities effectively. Therefore, there is a need to find out why it is not happening.

In this perspective, most of the ESL classrooms of Sri Lankan universities still overflow with higher number of students in all streams. As the result, when a lecturer assigns student-centered activities in ESL classes, most of the learners misuse and waste time in gossips, chat in mobile phones, and they do not involve in learning as the lecturer is unable to monitor, facilitate, evaluate or control the classroom alone. In addition, generally every class is scheduled for one hour for a lecturer for a large number of students. Although, many researchers emphasize that student number influence teaching and learning process, ESL classrooms in Sri Lankan universities consist larger number of students. Even though, the UGC of Sri Lankan universities focuses on lecturer-students ratio for every department and faculties, all students of the departments and the faculties offer the ESL courses in their degree programmes. In this situation, the Departments of English Language Teaching (ELT) manage to conduct the ESL programmes with limited number of permanent academic staff and temporary visiting lecturers and instructors. The teacher-students ratio is not considered while scheduling the ESL programme due to the limited number of lecturers and classroom facilities. In this perspective National Research and Evaluation Centre (2003) also reveals “All academics in all universities have very large classes in Year 1, and in some cases in Year 2, with as many as 400 students. The classes are taught in large tiered lecture theatres with fixed seats and tables. As a result, academic staff tend to use lecturing as their predominant teaching and learning approach”. This situation has not been evaluated or changed yet for implementing student-centred approach in ESL classrooms in Sri Lankan universities”. Navaz (2014) also re-imposes this as: “... there is no evidence for it being adopted by higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Nor are there any evaluations of the outcomes of the approach, where the Student Centred Learning is practised at a smaller scale.”

Lack of Learning Inputs

Learning inputs are very important factor that influences teaching and learning process. Although new teaching and learning methods like student-centred approach, outcome-based education etc. are introduced at Sri Lankan universities, learning inputs and learning material based on curriculum have not been updated to incorporate students-centred approach in ESL classrooms.

Specially, learning input refers to the exposure learners have to use authentic language in ESL classes. This will be from various sources, including the teacher, other learners, and the environment around the learners in ESL classes acquisition theories emphasize the reputation of comprehensible input, which is language just beyond the competence of the learner, and provides the ideal conditions for acquisition to happen for mastering the second language. In the ESL classroom, teachers are the most important accessible inputs for the learners. When teachers are talking in classes they are providing opportunities for learners to develop their comprehensions. Teachers can enhance this opportunity by choosing the right levels of complexity of vocabulary and structures, speed of delivery, degree of clarity, and range of register and style, however, most of the time lecturers and the learners use mother tongue in the ESL classes. Furthermore, it is able to consider that there are many ESL classrooms are still equipped with only blackboards or white boards for conducting lectures. This situation is a big challenge for implementing student-centred learning at the universities. Therefore, ESL classrooms of the universities must be equipped with variety of learning materials (visual aids: pictures, audio and videos) display with their standard in the ESL classrooms for acquiring skills and knowledge of the language in a student-centred classroom as 90% of students fail in the GCE (A/L) General English exam, but when a lecturer employs these teaching aids to the university students based on their competency, the feedback of other lecturers is not favourable, it is considered as primary education at schools. It is observed that most of the university students have very low competency in English language. Therefore, teaching material, inputs and overall curriculum must be considered and updated based on students' standard to improve their skills and knowledge step by step.

Inadequate Training and Limited Number of Academic Staff

Although Departments of English Language Teaching extend its academic services to all students of every faculty, the basic required infrastructure and the number of staff are inadequate to implement student-centred approach in ESL classes. In this sense, many visiting lectures, visiting instructors, temporary lecturers and instructors are appointed for every semester of academic year for English Language Teaching at the universities, but the staff are not trained and updated based on teaching and learning methods which are currently implemented in higher education system in Sri Lanka. Hence, the teachers, especially the visiting teachers, employ their own teaching method what they prefer and easier to conduct lectures with the sense of covering syllabus and allocated time. In addition, many retired teachers are recruited on visiting basis for ESL programmes at the universities. In this perspective, implementing updated teaching and learning approaches may not be successful in ESL classes as they are not pre-trained for conducting lectures, incorporating updated teaching and learning methods in the ESL classes at the universities.

Furthermore, though academic supportive staff are appointed in order to support for academic activities in the student-centred classes, they also need to conduct lectures due to lack of lecturers and overloaded students in the ELT departments. Specially, although newly appointed academic staff are trained in the induction programmes which are conducted by the Staff Development Centres during the probationary period based on updated academic activities, the academic supportive staff are not accomplished in such programmes. In this view, how can an academic supportive staff conduct lectures or support for academic activities without knowing the modern or updated classroom teaching and learning methodologies in ESL classrooms in the universities? This situation creates problems in implementing student-centred approach in ESL classes at the universities.

Conclusion

Therefore, the article suggests that the traditional lecture hall settings should be converted into student-centred classroom settings at all the universities in Sri Lanka to implement the student-centred learning successfully at all the universities. In this view, all the fixed and

lined furniture (tables and chairs) need to be replaced and adjustable to promote student-centred approach at the universities. For this process, the entire academic staff, non-academic staff: administrative and minor staff of the institution must be trained to adapt and cooperate for implementing the effective teaching and learning methods in every English classroom.

Moreover, the high number of students per lecturer should be reduced into less number of students to maintain an effective and standard lecturer-students ratio to promote student-centred approach. The ratio should be evaluated and upheld in all the academic year and in all classes of every department and faculty of the universities. The article emphasizes that reducing the number of students is the foremost step to stimulate the student-centred activities in the classroom to reach the goals of higher education at the universities. In this sense, it is considered that 20 to 25 students could be managed, monitored and facilitated by a lecturer through grouping the learners with four or five members in a small group to initiate group activities in order to enhance student-centred classroom at the universities in Sri Lanka.

In addition, the article states that teaching and learning inputs must be designed, updated and provided to integrate student-centred approach. In this perspective, traditional and not effective learning inputs and learning material should be evaluated and updated in the universities for implementing the effective teaching and learning methods in all the Sri Lankan universities. Moreover, teaching staff appointments, duties and professional training programmes of the staff must be promoted for implementing student-centred approach in English classroom at Sri Lankan universities to produce skillful graduates in the competitive world.

Generally, the curriculum of English Language teaching should be revised and updated to incorporate the cotemporary teaching and learning approaches. Overloaded curriculum may be a big challenge for implementing student-centred approach that consume lots of time to practice student-based activities to promote learners' autonomy. If there is overloaded curriculum for English courses at the university, the English language practitioner may struggle to complete syllabus of the academic year while implementing student-centred approach in the universities. Hence, the article suggests that designing student-centered

approach-centred curriculum must be done at the initial stage to implement the student-centred method at the universities in Sri Lanka.

Finally, the article emphasizes that the success of implantation of student-centred approach at Sri Lankan universities depends on every student, academic staff, non-academic staff and minor staff of the institution. Therefore, it is realized that everyone must be responsible and play their role effectively for implementing student-centred approach to achieve the goals of higher education in Sri Lanka.

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