

# **Learner choice in language study**

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*Learner-centred approaches normally focus either on the design of syllabuses that relate specifically to an analysis of students' needs or on the provision of classroom activities that encourage more student participation. This article, however, argues that a truly learner-centred approach should instead be concerned with allowing learners a greater role in the management of their learning, by providing opportunities for learner choice in the method and scope of study. Such opportunities could be introduced into the traditional classroom with minimal problems, and some suggestions for this are put forward. Learner choice as a more fundamental aspect of a language course can be provided through the establishment of self-access centres, and the article reports on experiments conducted at the University College of Bahrain. Teachers' and learners' attitudes to the centre are discussed, and it is suggested that more needs to be done to guide both teachers' and learners' expectations in order to make learner choices an active feature of foreign language study.*

Among the wide range of approaches to language education that are claimed to be 'learner-centred', there are two which are most frequently met. These approaches are:

- 1 learner-centred in terms of syllabus design (i.e. *what* the learners will learn);
- 2 learner-centred in terms of classroom activities (i.e. *how* the learners will learn).

In the first part of this article, I want to examine both of these approaches and from them suggest that, if our concern is truly with making the learner the *centre* of language education, then we should instead be looking more closely at another possibility:

- 3 learner-centred in terms of *who decides what and how* to learn.

In the second part, I will discuss how this third possibility might relate to teachers' and learners' expectations in language learning, and report on an experiment currently underway at the University College of Bahrain.

## **Three learner-centred approaches** *Syllabus design*

Largely as a result of the development of functional/notional approaches and related insights in sociolinguistics, it has become possible to construct detailed theoretical models for syllabus design. Syllabuses can therefore now be drawn up so as to relate specifically to the target-language needs of a particular group of learners. Often this is done by analysing the needs of the learners and drawing up lists of the functions and notions that the learners will need to be able to express, the grammatical structures they will have to

manipulate, the topics they should be able to discuss, and the settings and roles in which they will need to operate (see, for example, Munby 1978, van Ek 1980).

The development of theoretical models for syllabus design represents a major achievement. These models have contributed enormously to our ability to analyse our teaching and thus to make our courses directly relevant to particular learners. In this sense, then, a needs-analysis approach to syllabus design is indeed 'learner-centred'.

In another sense, however, the detailed specification of syllabuses inevitably restricts the learner. Devising syllabuses through needs-analyses involves classifying the learner as a member of a particular occupational or social category. The personal interests and wishes of the learner are thus overridden. In addition, since the resulting syllabus is based on an analysis of the end-of-course situation of the learner, no room is allowed for needs that emerge *during* the learning process, or indeed for any change that takes place in the end-of-course situation. Thus, although a needs-analysis approach to syllabus design does not imply any particular classroom methodology, it is clear that a tightly specified syllabus can in reality turn out to be a strait-jacket for both teacher and learner.

#### *Classroom activities*

The second most common approach claimed to be learner-centred relates to *how* learning proceeds in the classroom, rather than to *what* learning is to be done. We now realize that a healthy classroom is one in which learners are active and where teacher-talk is reduced to a minimum. We therefore spend considerable amounts of time devising tasks that require learners to work in groups, to do role plays, to fill in charts or grids, to give their personal opinions, and generally to engage in more oral work. These tasks have been devised particularly in relation to communicative approaches, since it is now believed that we should provide activities that require learners to use the language for particular purposes.

There seems little doubt that such activities can produce learners who are more ready to use the language outside the classroom. But they can also produce learners who feel that too much is expected from them inside the classroom. Many of these activities involve the learners working together on tasks which, despite a functional or notional label, are essentially purposeless in terms of real information exchange. What the learners are required to do is to *pretend* that communication has taken place. Raimes (1983) gives a clear example of this. Students are divided into pairs and given cards. On one card it says:

You are in London on a business trip and you have Saturday free. You want to know if the British Museum is open and how much the entrance fee is.

The other student has a card which says:

The museum is open Monday to Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is no entrance fee.

The students then have to pretend to call each other up and ask for information using the form 'Could you please tell me . . .?' The most important word here is 'pretend'. Students are being asked to 'address a question that they have not made up to a designated person who has to be told the answer, and then wait for an answer that makes no difference to them whatsoever' (Raimes 1983:542).

There are other problems, however, associated merely with the continual use of group work, pair work, etc., upon which many learner-centred classroom activities rest. There is a danger that the teacher becomes the puppeteer who pulls the strings and requires the learners to jump up and down on demand. The effect of such activities can thus be worse than the effect of a teacher who insists on totally passive learners. Learner-centred classroom activities can require the learner to demonstrate actively that it is the teacher who has the dominant role.

The dangers that I have outlined in learner-centred syllabus design and learner-centred classroom activities all seem to derive from one basic fact: that in both cases it is the teacher or syllabus designer who has made all the decisions. In the first case, learners have no choice over *what* they will learn; in the second case, they have no choice over *how* they will learn. The missing element for the learner in both can be expressed simply as *choice*.

*Who decides what and how to learn?*

The above discussion of learner-centred syllabus design and learner-centred classroom activities has already pointed up some of the reasons for introducing more learner choice into language courses. The most basic of these is, simply stated: not all learners are the same. Most language courses, however, are organized so as to permit only one route through the learning task in terms both of linguistic content and of teaching/learning methods. Most learners, in other words, are required to do the same things at more or less the same time and in more or less the same order. Yet it seems obvious that we should not expect every student to learn in the same way, at the same rate, or to have the same interests and abilities as everyone else. We have, in fact, ample evidence that learners do differ greatly: our end-of-course tests that produce different marks for different learners. The logical conclusion to draw from this is that we should take the existence of variations in learners' abilities and interests much more seriously and not expect all learners to conform to one approach to language study. We should, in other words, provide learner choice.<sup>2</sup>

Theoretically, learner choice could be introduced into any of the areas where the teacher usually takes responsibility. These are areas of course management and can be set out as in Figure 1. I am not suggesting that we should make learner choice available in all the areas indicated. In most situations this would be neither feasible nor desirable because of, for example, the nature and goals of the educational institutions, the resources available, and the background of both teachers and learners. Learner choice in some of these areas could, however, be introduced into the traditional classroom with little difficulty but significant benefit.

TIME:	time spent on the learning material and decisions about when study takes place.
GOALS:	the short-term and long-term objectives of learning.
MODE:	{ grouping: in pairs/groups/alone/large classes. activity: types of tasks and skill involved.
CONTENT:	{ subject matter: story or information content of the learning material. linguistic content: structures, functions, etc.
EVALUATION:	by whom? when? in what form?
GUIDANCE:	degree and nature of help provided.

*Figure 1: Factors in course management*

In terms of *content*, for example, learners could be allowed choice in their reading matter. Often one finds the situation where a whole class is using the same reader and all the students move through the text at the same time, chapter by chapter. Such a situation seems hardly likely to motivate students to read alone and, because the teacher is required to check continually on the learners' comprehension, reading becomes something of a chore. It would seem a relatively simple matter, instead of buying twenty copies of the same book, to buy twenty different books and build up a class library.

In terms of *time* and *goals*, a lot more use could be made of project work. Learners could be required to devise their own project idea in consultation with the teacher and to submit the completed work by some agreed date. How much time was spent working on the project, and when, could thus be left up to the learners. Provision could also be made for project work to be done either individually or in groups/pairs and so provide choice in *mode* of study.

Learner choice in *time* and *guidance* could also be provided by allowing learners control over the tape recorder when doing listening comprehension work. This would permit them to listen as much as they felt necessary and to help each other. Similarly, if the learners had control over a tape-recording of any roleplays that they did, they could analyse their own mistakes, rather than being dependent on the teacher for correction.

These are specific suggestions that would not involve too many changes in the traditional classroom but which should, nevertheless, produce significant benefits. It would also be possible, however, to introduce choice as a more fundamental aspect of language study, such that learners became actively involved in deciding over most, if not all, of the areas listed above. It is this idea that is behind experiments in self-access work currently under way at the University College of Bahrain. However, providing more learner choice implies a redefinition of the roles of both teachers and learners and, for this reason, I want now to look at the nature of learner and teacher expectations in language study.

**Learner and teacher  
expectations in  
language study**  
*Learner expectations*

There is a widespread belief that in order to learn one has to be taught. Learners thus normally expect the teacher to organize the learning task for them, and they see the teacher as the possessor of a body of knowledge which he or she must transmit to them. These expectations are characteristic of students who expect to sit passively and listen to considerable amounts of teacher-talk. Motivation is largely sought through the provision of marks, and because of this, students are discouraged from working together. Although there is evidence that this situation is changing, it still represents the experience of most students who go through formal education. The implication is that learners do not expect to become involved in accepting responsibility for how and what to learn. In short, they do not expect to have to choose. This suggests, therefore, that we would have to move very gradually in making choice a fundamental feature of a language course.

*Teacher expectations*

Very simply, teachers generally have one of the following basic expectations: on the one hand, there is the view that the teacher should assume the dominant role in the classroom and act as the sole source of information about the language. According to this view, learners need to be told exactly what to do and, furthermore, need to be watched over while they do it.

Working together is referred to as 'cheating'. At the opposite end of the spectrum, however, there is the view that learners can gain a lot by being encouraged to work in groups or pairs and to accept some degree of responsibility for their learning. According to this view, learners can show great motivation and enthusiasm, and a less dominant teacher in the classroom allows the learners to become more involved in their learning.

Dickinson (1978) has pointed out how these two opposing views can be expressed in terms of McGregor's ideas on motivation (1961). Although originally written about motivation to work, McGregor's ideas can easily be adapted to motivation to study. Students can be viewed in two ways. The traditional view of students is expressed in McGregor's Theory X. This is that students:

- a. dislike and avoid study and will thus cheat at any given opportunity;
- b. must be coerced and threatened with punishment in order to get them to make the required effort;
- c. prefer to be directed, have little ambition, and want security above all.

In contrast, McGregor's Theory Y would see students in a more positive light. According to this theory, if students are given the necessary opportunities, they:

- a. enjoy mental and physical work;
- b. exercise self-control and self-direction;
- c. are committed to the objectives of a course because of the reward of achievement;
- d. accept responsibility;
- e. show a great deal of imagination in solving problems.

These two theories, McGregor believes, are self-fulfilling prophecies: if teachers approach students with Theory Y in mind, then they will find that the students demonstrate the attitudes and abilities it indicates. Students will respond favourably to study and become involved in what they are doing. If, on the other hand, teachers believe in Theory X, they will find that students demonstrate the characteristics it predicts. Systems set up to prevent cheating, for example, will actually encourage cheating to take place. McGregor's work thus suggests that teachers' attitudes are as significant as learners' attitudes in affecting the success or otherwise of the introduction of learner choice into language courses. With this in mind, I want now to examine the experiment in providing such choice through self-access work currently under way at the University College of Bahrain.

**Learner choice in a  
self-access centre:  
an experiment**

The term 'self-access centre' usually refers to a room where learning materials are provided for learners to use without direct teacher supervision. The materials are usually arranged in such a way that the students can find what they want easily and quickly. They may then work on these materials at their own pace and, through the use of answer keys, evaluate their own work.

The self-access centre (SAC) at the University College of Bahrain provides materials for all the skills, though primarily in the areas of writing, reading, and listening. Most materials are available as worksheets which are coded according to level (elementary/lower-intermediate/upper-intermediate/advanced) and the main skill involved. A 'core course' series of worksheets provides a basic integrated skills course at each of the four levels. Other materials in the SAC include a large stock of readers for loan;

stories, plays, and songs on tape; and a selection of course books and reference books. Students are encouraged to work together, and junction boxes are provided that enable up to six students to listen to the same cassette. The centre is open throughout the day.

Use of the SAC is a course requirement for the 150 students enrolled on the BEd. degree programme. The SAC has been in operation for two semesters now and it is still largely experimental. Two systems of SAC use have been tried, with widely differing results.

*System 1* When the SAC was first set up, it was felt by a majority of the staff concerned that the students would be unlikely to make good use of the centre unless they were required to do a specified number of hours of SAC work during the course. Accordingly, a course requirement was introduced which made it mandatory for students to put in at least two hours' SAC work a week on average throughout the semester. A system was devised whereby a supervisor recorded the time spent by each student in the SAC. Students were, however, allowed freedom of choice in the work that they did in the centre. At the middle and end of the semester, the hours put in by each student were totalled and they were required to make up any shortfall.

*Outcomes* The results of this initial system were very depressing. It did not take students long to discover that the most important criterion was bodily presence in the SAC, rather than actual work. As the end of the semester approached, the centre became crowded with students whose sole aim was to make up their hours. They became expert in pretending to do work—hiding books in Arabic behind an English book or doing homework for other subjects with an SAC worksheet readily at hand. Staff also became very antagonistic to the centre, as they were continually being approached by students who wanted to know how many hours were recorded against their names.

It is not difficult to see why this system proved such a disaster. It was firmly based on McGregor's Theory X, since it rested on the assumption that students would not attend the SAC unless they were forced to. Accordingly, students then developed strategies for cheating. The centre's contribution to language learning under this system was probably minimal.

*System 2* Despite general opposition among the teaching staff, the SAC was retained as a course requirement for a new intake of BEd. students, but under a revised system. Instead of an attendance requirement, students were to be asked to show that they had put some effort into SAC use. Each student was issued with a file into which they were to put the worksheets that they completed and where they were also to make a note of any difficulties that they encountered. During the semester at least four pre-arranged meetings were to be held between each student and the class teacher. At these meetings, the student and the teacher were to review the work that the student had done in the SAC and together plan the work that was to be done by the next meeting. The student's opinions on what he or she wanted to do in the SAC were intended to be the basis of the work plan. A grade that accounted for twenty per cent of the total marks for the course was assigned in relation to the amount of effort shown by the student in SAC use. The grade was not related directly to the level of the material that the student was using, nor to the quantity of mistakes made.



thought it a valuable part of the course). Yet, the inability of many of the students to express their views at the one-to-one meetings is clearly reflected in item 3, where 42 per cent said they felt unable to say what they wanted to do.

Closer examination of these responses, however, reveals some interesting facts that bear out the arguments on learner and teacher expectations mentioned earlier in this article. The students enrolled on the course were of two types: mature students (roughly one-third) who had themselves been teaching for a number of years (not, however, as language teachers) and school leavers (roughly two-thirds). It was found that, whereas only 39 per cent of the school leavers had marked 'yes' for item 2, as many as 92 per cent of the mature students had done so. Similarly, 13 per cent of the school leavers had rated the SAC as 4 or less on item 1, compared with only 4 per cent of the mature students. The great disparity between these two sets of figures leads one to speculate that the mature students' prior experience and their age made them less dependent on the teacher and caused them to approach SAC work with a greater sense of personal responsibility.

A second fact emerged in relation to the school leavers' responses: not surprisingly, perhaps, it appeared that almost without exception those students that had marked 'No' on item 3 had also rated the SAC as 4 or below on item 1. More interestingly, it appeared that just over three-quarters of these students were in classes whose teachers were largely unsympathetic to the aims of the SAC. This latter point reinforces the suggestion made earlier that teachers' attitudes may be crucial in determining the students' reaction to provision for independent study.

There can, however, be no doubt that the majority of students approached SAC work with considerable enthusiasm. It played a valuable role in developing their abilities in English, and for many students offered a unique opportunity to devote a major part of their time to studying the language well beyond the course requirements.

### **Final comments**

The outcome of the experiments with self-access work at the University College indicates that a lot more work needs to be done to enable both teachers and learners to make profitable use of learner choice as a fundamental aspect of a language course. The following points seem relevant here:

#### ***Teacher expectations and experience***

We need to carry out further research into the precise ways in which learners differ in their approach to language study. The results of this research should become a major feature of teacher training and in-service courses so that we can begin to foster the development of teacher attitudes that appreciate the value of independent study. We also need to develop a clearer understanding of when our help is or is not required by learners so as to reduce the chances of interfering with language learning.

#### ***Learner expectations and experience***

The idea of 'learner training' has already been put forward in the literature on self-directed study (see, for example, Holec 1980). If we wish to involve learners more in the running of a language course, then we need to devise tasks and materials that specifically develop the learner's ability to choose. Such tasks could involve learners in thinking more deeply about what they need to study and how they need to study (for examples of such tasks see Littlejohn 1983). 'Ideas books' that would provide a list of possible ways of making use of materials is another suggestion that has been made (see

Allwright 1981). The development of methods of self-assessment also seems important here, since through assessment learners could develop a clearer picture of where they need to direct their efforts.

I have argued in this article that a truly learner-centred approach to language education must provide opportunities for learner choice in the method and scope of study. I noted that some elements of choice could be introduced into the traditional classroom with minimal organizational changes. Extending learner choice so that it becomes a fundamental aspect of any course implies, however, a redefinition of teachers' and students' roles which, given the prior experience of both parties, can present considerable problems. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that we must move gradually if we are to expect learners to take responsibility for managing their own learning. More research needs to be done into the nature of learners' and teachers' expectations and how these can be educated to make learner choice more feasible. □

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#### Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Third Educational Arabia Conference, Bahrain, February 1984.
- 2 For further reasons for providing learner choice, see Littlejohn 1983.

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