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Readdressing the Implementation of Learner-Centered Education in Teacher Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

Being of a fuzzy nature, learner-centeredness has been approached and grasped differently by teachers and teacher educators at various learning contexts. Despite its preponderance in educational arena since roughly half a century ago, learner-centered education (LCE) seems to still be surrounded by a myriad of misconceptions, delusions and uncertainties. Part of this haziness and perplexity in applying LCE appears to have resulted from lack of proper training with regard to its judicious implementation in compliance with the specific contextual features and requirements. Striving to establish a context-sensitive and culturally-responsive approach to LCE in the Iranian educational context, the researchers in the current study embarked on a training program for EFL teachers, in which the basic tenets of a learner-centered methodology were introduced through hands-on practice and involvement. Teachers' conduct prior and successive to training workshops was screened via pre- and post-observation by three expert teacher educators. The evaluation process was carried out by means of a checklist with 12 criteria on a scale of 1 to 5. The findings pointed toward the significant outperformance of trained compared to non-trained teachers based on the consensus among the three experts, as well as the results of Mann Whitney U test. The implications of the study are discussed throughout the paper.

Keywords: *Learner-Centered Education, Iranian, EFL, Teachers, Teacher Education*

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the current millennium, Weimer (2002) was among the first researchers who struck a blow for educational reforms which were aimed at implementing learner-centered teaching (LCT). In her book on successful practice of LCT, she underscores the need for five key changes that are required for the proper implementation of learner-centered education (LCE). These five prerequisites for the true implementation of LCE, as she states, are changes in balance of power, function of content, role of teacher, responsibility for learning and purpose and processes of evaluation. Regarding the first factor, she is of the view that we need more democratic learning environments to facilitate the implementation of LCE. In terms of content, she endorses constructivist view and calls for more learner-driven content. Concerning teachers' role, she demands that teacher take a less authoritative role. Promoting self-regulated learning and learning-focused not score-bound assessment are the last two

requirements for the appropriate implementation of LCE that she highlights. In addition, as Stewart and Irie (2012) state, successful practice of LCE is also contingent upon teachers' sense of creativity and autonomy. To adopt Richards and Rogers' (2001) words,

Absent from the traditional view of methods is a concept of learner-centeredness and teacher creativity: an acknowledgment that learners bring different learning styles and preferences to the learning process, that they should be consulted in the process of developing a teaching program, and that teaching methods must be flexible and adaptive to learners' needs and interests. At the same time, there is often little room for the teacher's own personal initiative and teaching style. The teacher must submit herself or himself to the method (p. 247).

Thus, it can be inferred from the above quotation that the traditional view of teaching was a restrictive outlook which hampered teachers' initiative and autonomy and, as a result, encumbered the implementation of LCE. Though with the outburst of more constructivist and

humanistic approaches to pedagogy, and the insurgence of more communicative methodologies in the recent decades LCE has become more feasible, the procedure is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. A plethora of intricacies and inaccuracies are likely to follow from irresponsible and indiscreet application of LCE. While the approach can prove to be highly effective and productive in one context, it may be entirely counterproductive in another. The complications underlying successful practice of LCE mainly emanate from negligence toward contextual, sociocultural and environmental factors.

Among the principal issues that confound the implementation of LCE, Schweisfurth (2013) refers to misconceptions about the term, teachers, parents and learners' unfamiliarity with it, and their reluctance toward applying it. Lack of sufficient pre-service and in-service training is another significant culprit which underpins inefficiency of LCE practice. Still another major factor that impedes cogent practice of LCE, according to Paris and Gespass (2001), is the misalliance between what is demanded from teachers and what is stipulated in supervisory sessions. Despite current predisposition toward learner-centered methodologies, most teacher supervision episodes are predominantly teacher-centered and fail to provide sufficient room for learners and student teachers' stances. In like manner, Hains and Smith (2012) refer to three groups of barriers blocking LCE implementation, i.e. student-related factors, faculty concerns and administrative issues.

Admitting that LCE is difficult to define as it is associated with so many similar terms including progressive education, enquiry-based learning and constructivism, Schweisfurth (2013, p. 20) delineates LCE as "a pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests" [*italics in the original*].

In an early call for learner-centeredness, Urbanski (1995) enunciates that a full-scale implementation of LCE requires instilling reform into schools at all educational layers. These changes of vision, as he states, must occur not only in teaching and learning perspectives, but also in learning context facets and decision-makers' standpoints.

In a meta-analysis of 119 studies conducted on LCE in the 1948-2004 period, Cornelius-White (2007) found that despite the alleged variability across findings, learner-centered variables revealed an above-average correlation with positive student outcomes.

Enumerating the benefits LCE may provide for learners, Berdrow and Evers (2011) refer to fostering feeling of ownership, encouraging active involvement, turning assessment to a shared activity, facilitating genuine exchange of opinions, burgeoning effective learning, augmenting learner autonomy, valuing learners' experiences and judgments, facilitating transfer of learning skills, creating communities of learning with increased involvement, diminishing the teachers' burden, and advocating critical thinking in learners.

Drawing on tenets of constructivism, Smart, Witt and Scott (2012) report on their use of an inductive approach for conducting learner-centered teaching, in which teachers acted as facilitators for helping learners construct their own personal knowledge. Forming communities of practice for college-level learners studying business communication, they succeeded in creating a thriving, inclusive and reflective learning environment.

Hains and Smith (2012) performed a qualitative case study, in which the process of learner-centered experiential course design was analyzed from both student and faculty perspectives. Seven undergraduate students in agricultural faculty took part in the study along with their professor. A 12-day course was developed by this group and launched across the state of Colorado. The means of data collection in the study involved journal writing, interview and video-recording. The experience was well received by both students themselves and faculty as a practical, constructive and motivating one, particularly on account of the fact that it provided students with a linkage between theory and practice and led to deeper understanding of learned material.

In a comparative study, Yamagata (2016) probed the potential efficacy of learner-centered instruction vis-à-vis a teacher-centered course. The focus of the study was on learning of basic verbs via images. The participants of the study were 241 Japanese EFL learners studying at junior high school. The results indicated that learner-centered approach worked better than the teacher-centered one in terms of



both retention and accuracy rates among learners. The results of questionnaire analysis also supported the finding with regard to preeminence of LCE compared to teacher-centered approach.

In their probe into the viability of enhancing learners' procedural skills through adopting a learner-centered approach, Toy, McKay, Walker, Johnson and Arnett (2017) selected 24 sophomores and juniors from a medical college. At the culmination of research, it was found that the adoption of LCE had led to significant enhancement among the participants in terms of self-confidence, knowledge and procedural skills.

Finally, in a more recent scrutiny, McCoy, Pettit, Kellar and Morgan (2018) analyzed the status of LCE from a different perspective. Mainly interested in the transition from teacher-centered approach to more recent learning-centered curriculum, the researchers appraised how gradual movement toward active learning took place at a medical college. A total of 20 medical school faculty members were chosen as the participants of their study. Making use of a sequential, explanatory mixed methods design, they used interviews as the main means of data collection. The results pointed toward the gradual preponderance of LCE in the context of medical schools. Having gone through a brief review of literature on the issue, the researchers came to the conclusion that very scant heed has been given to the role training can play in bringing about enhanced LCE implementation. Thus, aiming to fill in this gap, the researchers in the current study set out to explore the following research question to come up with more cogent results with regard to the effect of LCE-oriented training on better practice of learner-centered education. In line with the research objective, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: Does LCE-focused training bring about EFL teachers' enhancement in implementing learner-centered instruction?

2. Methodology

As stated earlier, the researchers in the present study were after investigating the potential effect of LCE-focused training on teachers' successful implementation of learner-centered methodology. In so doing, a quasi-experimental design was opted for, in which the experimental group went through pre-observation, treatment and post-observation phases, while in the second

group (control group) no training was held as to the underlying tenets of LCE.

2.1 Participants

Using convenience sampling procedure, a total of 30 institute EFL teachers were chosen as the participants of the study. The selected teachers were from both genders and their age ranged from 25 to 40. The participating teachers were recruited from three provinces in Iran, namely Khuzestan, Mazandaran and West Azerbaijan. In terms of experience, all participants enjoyed a minimum of five years of teaching background. Furthermore, all teachers held an academic degree in TEFL, ranging from BA to PhD.

2.2 Instrumentation

Class observation was utilized as the primary means of data collection in the current study. To obtain a clear picture of teachers' implementation of LCE, two entire sessions of each teacher's class were observed using Shihiba's (2011) checklist (see the appendix). The employed checklist evaluated teachers' conduct within LCE framework with regard to 12 key criteria arranged on a five-point Likert-type scale. Expert validation was used as the main method through which the checklist items were screened and authenticated.

2.3 Procedure

At the outset of study, 30 EFL teachers were selected from a number of language schools across three provinces in Iran. Ten teachers teaching at intermediate level were chosen from each province, and the selected participants were then grouped into experimental and control groups. In so doing, 5 out of 10 participants in each province were randomly assigned to either experimental or control group. After briefing the teachers on the aims of research, three trained observers and expert teachers (one of the current researchers along with two of his colleagues) went through pre-observation phase of research. In so doing, one full session of each participant's class was observed and evaluated using the checklist adapted from Shihiba (2011) and drawing on the 12 LCE implementation criteria arranged on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Having run the pre-observation phase, one of the researchers in the current study took charge of holding LCE workshops for the teachers in experimental group. In the one-day workshop and training held for these teachers, an attempt was made to highlight the key tenets of LCE and its potential challenges. Involving the

participating teachers in a hands-on, practical experience, the training program was arranged in a way to sensitize the teachers toward addressing the contextual requirements for the proper implementation of LCE. The post-observation was then carried out in a manner akin to pre-observation using the same checklist and evaluation criteria.

2.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the teachers' obtained scores on pre- and post-observation, non-parametric equivalent of independent samples *t*-test (Mann Whitney U test) was run on SPSS 22, as the conditions for normality were not met.

3. Results

To find out whether LCE training had proven useful in pushing teachers toward more efficient implementation of learner-centered methodology, initially the scores of trained and untrained teachers on pre-observation phase were analyzed in terms of normality. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics obtained for pre-observation scores.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-observation Scores

	Statistic	Std. Error
Pre-observation Mean	40.2333	.82585
95% Confidence Interval for Lower Bound	38.5443	
Mean Upper Bound	41.9224	
5% Trimmed Mean	40.4074	
Median	40.0000	
Variance	20.461	
Std. Deviation	4.52337	
Minimum	29.00	
Maximum	49.00	
Range	20.00	
Interquartile Range	4.25	
Skewness	-.743	.427
Kurtosis	1.514	.833

As is seen in Table 1, the mean score, variance and standard deviation for pre-observation scores equal 40.23, 20.46 and 4.52, respectively. Furthermore, the minimum and maximum scores are 29 and 49. Table 2 shows the results of normality test run on pre-observation scores.

Table 2: Test of Normality for Pre-observation Scores

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-observation	.226	30	.000	.904	30	.011

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

In line with the results of normality tests shown in Table 2, it is found that scores obtained on pre-observation session do not enjoy normal distribution, and hence the non-parametric equivalent of independent samples *t*-test (Mann Whitney U test) was run to compare the means. Figure 1 helps provide a better, more vivid illustration of the way scores are distributed, which might

reveal why the conditions for normality are not met.

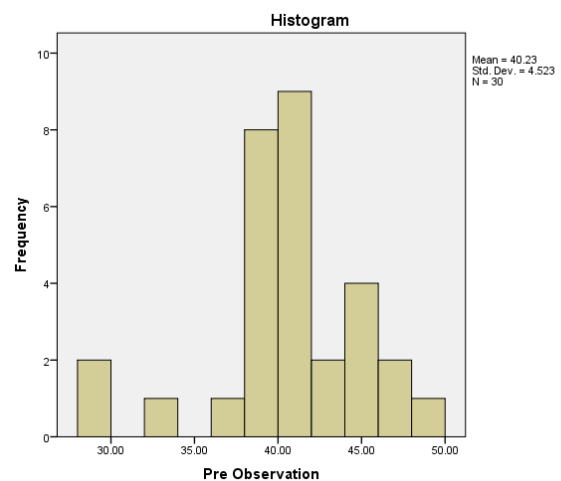


Figure 1: The Histogram for the Distribution of Pre-observation Scores

Table 3 depicts the results of Mann-Whitney U Test and Table 4 shows the rank orders for the scores of two groups.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney U Test for Pre-observation Scores

	Pre-observation
Mann-Whitney U	67.000
Wilcoxon W	187.000
Z	-1.913
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.056
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.061 ^b

a. Grouping Variable: Group
b. Not corrected for ties.

Table 4: Ranks Obtained through Mann-Whitney U Test for Pre-observation Scores

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Pre-observation	Experimental	15	12.47	187.00
	Control	15	18.53	278.00
	Total	30		

As is seen in Table 3, the differences between the performances of two groups on pre-observation are found to be non-significant ($p = .056 > .05$). Next, the normality of posttest data was put to test in a manner akin to what was done for pre-observation scores. The results of this analysis are revealed in Tables 5 and 6, as well as Figure 2.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Post-observation Scores

	Statistic	Std. Error
Post-observation Mean	47.1000	1.41043
95% Confidence Interval for Lower Bound	44.2153	
Mean Upper Bound	49.9847	
5% Trimmed Mean	47.1111	
Median	47.5000	
Variance	59.679	
Std. Deviation	7.72524	
Minimum	32.00	
Maximum	60.00	
Range	28.00	
Interquartile Range	14.00	
Skewness	.005	.427
Kurtosis	-1.242	.833

As Table 5 indicates, the mean score, variance and standard deviation for post-observation scores are 47.10, 59.67 and 7.72, respectively. Furthermore, the minimum and maximum scores are 32 and



60. Table 6 illustrates the results of normality test run on post-observation scores.

Table 6: Test of Normality for Post-observation Scores

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Post-observation	.179	30	.015	.928	30	.042

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As the data in Table 6 help reveal, post-observation scores are not normally distributed and therefore, non-parametric equivalent of Independent Samples t-test (Mann Whitney U test) was again used to analyze the data. Figure 2 helps provide a better, more vivid illustration of the way scores are distributed, which might reveal why the conditions for normality are not met.

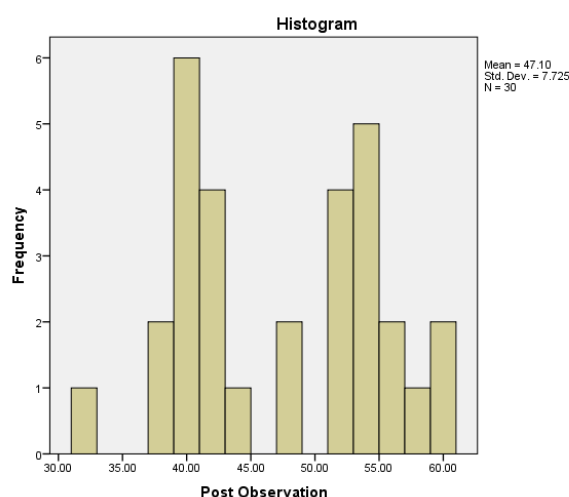


Figure 2: The Histogram for the Distribution of Post-observation Scores

Table 7 depicts the results of Mann-Whitney U Test, based on which the differences between the performances of two groups on post-observation are found to be non-significant. Table 8 shows the rank orders for the scores of two groups.

Table 7: Mann-Whitney U Test for Post-observation Scores

	Post-observation
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Wilcoxon W	120.000
Z	-4.684
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.000 ^b

a. Grouping Variable: Group
b. Not corrected for ties.

Table 8: Ranks Obtained through Mann-Whitney U Test for Post-observation Scores

As the results of analysis in Table 7 indicate, the differences between the performances of two groups on post-observation are found to be significant ($p =$

.00 < .05). That is to say, teachers in LCE training group have outperformed their counterparts in the non-training group in terms of successful practice of LCE.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The result obtained in the current study is indicative of the key role training plays in successful practice of LCE. Though previous research substantiates the efficacy of LCE adoption for enhanced learning conditions, no direct evidence could be found by the researchers as to the effectiveness of training for augmenting teachers' implementation of LCE. Among the studies that have shown the usefulness of LCE for educational betterment and may provide partial support for the findings of the current study, reference can be made to the work done by Toy, et al. (2017). In their research which was mainly focused on the impact of LCE on enhancing college students' skills, it was indicated that LCE can lead to improved self-confidence, knowledge and procedural skills among learners. Furthermore, Berdrow and Evers (2011) highlight the crucial role of higher education in the twenty first century in bringing up self-reflective, autonomous and critical individuals who can function more efficiently in the workplace. Lifelong employability and success in career can be guaranteed through establishing more reflective learner-centered environments. Regarding the implementation of LCE and the intricacies on the way of achieving it, McCoy, et al. (2018) maintain that moving toward LCE is a gradual process, which is in need of sufficient training.

In this regard, Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) are of the view that for the real change in educational system and instructional approaches to take effect, the key determining factor is teachers' attitudes in implementation of change. In much the same way, Lamie (2004) confirms that change is a process that takes place over a long period of time and necessitates attitudinal modifications in teachers and other educational stakeholders.

Though LCE is now known as "a widely endorsed, yet partially debatable 21st-century concept" (Alavinia, 2013, p. 115), Aslan and Reigeluth (2015) believe that one of the major challenges on the way of implementing LCE is creating changes in the learners' mindset. Leaving behind the notions of teacher-directed learning and switching to self-directed learning in which they assume more responsibility for their

own learning at times proves to be a big challenge for learners who are accustomed to traditional ways of instruction.

Among the other factors that may hinder the appropriate implementation of LCE seems to be the teachers' reluctance for adapting to change. As Ghanbari and Ketabi (2011) pointed out in their study, teachers who have got along with the traditional methodology of teaching for many years may be abruptly encountered with LCE as an innovative method of teaching and feel unprepared to implement it in their classroom.

After all, though the findings of the current study may look promising for educational authorities and policy makers to capitalize more on training courses for raising (novice) teachers' awareness of LCE and its requirements, there is still further need for more in-depth research into the nature of LCE and the impediments and intricacies on the way of its proper application. As the results of the current study helped reveal, LCE led to great outperformance of those teachers who were exposed to LCE-oriented training. Nevertheless, before any generalizations and conclusions are made, more full-fledged research is called for to corroborate the findings of the current study and allow for generalizability of the findings with increased confidence.

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Appendix: LCE Checklist Used for Pre- and Post-Observation (Adapted from Shihiba, 2011).

No.	The statement	SD	D	U	A	SA
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Facilitating and guiding students' learning					
2	Making students ready for assuming responsibility for their own learning					
3	Negotiation and needs-based tasks and activities					
4	Student initiation					
5	The amount of student talk					
6	Seating arrangement (horseshoe or circular)					
7	The amount of pair and Group work					
8	Use of role-play activities					
9	Using games, humour and language play					
10	Implementing problem solving activities					
11	Using self and peer assessment					
12	Authenticity and addressing learners' interest					