

THE ROLE OF A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH IN LANGUAGE TEACHING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY : A MODEL COURSE DESIGN

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

This is illustrated through the design of a model course, namely English –2, offered to freshman year students at Doğuş University. This course takes students through the stages of conducting academic research and presenting the findings of their research in the form of a written project which appropriately fulfills academic standards. The design of the course requires much of the work to be done outside class and by the learners themselves.

Hence, this paper develops the idea that students who take this course increase their confidence in working on their own as well as learning to take the responsibility for their own learning, which are the two major demands of academic study in university education.

Key Words: *Learner-Centredness, Independent Study, Learner Autonomy, Taking Responsibility for Learning.*

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı "Öğrenci-merkezli" bir yabancı dil eğitim programının, öğrencilerin okuma ve yazma gibi temel birtakım dil becerilerinin gelişmesine yardımcı olmasının yanısıra, öğrenme sorumluluğu alma ve bağımsız çalışma yetilerinin artırılması üzerinde de olumlu etkileri olabileceğine dikkat çekmektedir.

Bu fikir Doğuş Üniversitesi'nde birinci sınıf öğrencilerine verilen İngilizce –2 dersi örneği üzerinde anlatılmaktadır. Bu derste öğrencilere akademik standartlara uygun bir proje çalışmasını tamamlayabilmek için seçtikleri konu üzerinde araştırma yapmak, bilgi toplamak, not tutmak, özetlemek ve analiz edilen bilgilerden bir sentez oluşturmak gibi bir takım öğrenme deneyimleri kazandırılması amaçlanmaktadır. Çalışmanın oldukça önemli bir kısmı ders dışı zamanlarda, öğrencinin kendisi tarafından yürütülmektedir.

Bu dersi alan birinci sınıf öğrencilerinin İngilizce ve akademik standartlara uygun araştırma yapma becerilerinin yanısıra, üniversite öğrencisi olmanın temel özelliklerinden olan öğrenme sorumluluğunu alma ve bağımsız çalışma yetilerini de geliştirdiği fikri benimsenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Öğrenci-Merkezlilik, Bağımsız Çalışma, Bireysel Öğrenme, Öğrenme Sorumluluğu Alma.*

The changed views on the nature of language and learning in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the emergence of a new language teaching methodology, namely Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As opposed to the traditional approaches of the 1950s and 1960s, which viewed language as "a system of rule-governed structures hierarchically arranged" and language learning as "habit formation" (Nunan and Lamb, 1996:14), CLT defined language as "a system for the expression of meaning" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:71), the primary function being interaction and communication.

These trends in the definition of language and learning also had some implications for how the roles of learners, teachers and materials were seen. With the emergence of this new methodology, learners were no longer considered as passive recipients of knowledge; they were viewed as active participants who are involved in various stages of teaching and learning. Teachers, on the other hand, started to adopt the role of "communication facilitator" instead of being the source of information, and materials were designed in such a way that they would promote the real-life uses of the language, which the learners are likely to experience in an authentic communication situation.

Hence, with the introduction of this new methodology the central focus in language teaching started to shift from the content or the set of rules to be transferred to the learners to the real-life needs and goals of the language learners. This, in effect, has led to the development of a learner-centered approach in language teaching and a great deal of research especially within the last decade has mainly focused on re-examining and re-defining the process of teaching and learning from a learner-centred point of view:

...Another trend in recent years which has stemmed from CLT has been the development of learner-centred approaches to language teaching, in which information by and from learners is used in planning, implementing and evaluating language programmes. While the learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and processes to traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information by and from learners will be built into every phase of the curriculum process. Curriculum development becomes a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners will be involved in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation (Nunan, 1989:19).

As the emphasis on learner involvement started to gain ground, the process of learning and the roles and responsibilities of learners were re-evaluated within the context of a learner-centred curriculum. With this new understanding of teaching and learning, it was argued that learning should be seen as an "individual act" and that learners should have a share in the responsibility for their own learning:

The act of learning something must always be a personal, individual act. No-one can learn the meaning of a word for me, though, of course, others can help me towards that end (Dickinson, 1987: 9).

However, the impracticality of expecting learners to adopt this new role immediately was also noted:

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

Thus, in order to help learners develop this ability of undertaking responsibilities for their own learning and work toward the goal of becoming autonomous learners, the concept of learner training was developed. Tudor defines this new concept as follows:

...Learner training could ...be defined as the process by which learners are helped to deepen their understanding of the nature of language learning, and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to pursue their learning goals in an informed and self-directive manner (Tudor, 1996: 37).

As implied in the quotation above, the role of teachers in this new learning experience is to help students develop the necessary skills for becoming independent learners. Dickinson suggests that this can be achieved by providing learners with opportunities to practise language for communicative purposes: "... many teachers using such (communicative) methods are, consciously or not, involved in helping their students to learn how to learn" (1987: 34).

Hence, it can be concluded that CLT promotes a learner-centred methodology not only because the design of such programmes is based on real-life needs and the communicative goals of the student but also because the practice of communicative methods plays a significant role in learner training.

This assumption is supported by Nunan in his definition of "the good communicative lesson":

The "good communicative lesson" will:

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

ety of settings in and out of the classroom

- expose learners to the language as system
- encourage learners to develop skills in learning how to learn
- integrate the four macroskills
- provide controlled practice in enabling microskills (reading, listening, speaking and writing)
- involve learners in creative language use (Nunan, 1989: 132).

Consequently, based on the discussions on CLT and Learner-Centred approach presented above, it is argued in this paper that the characteristics and design features of *English-2* offered to Freshman students at Doğuş University promote the development of learner autonomy as they incorporate the principles of CLT and aim at preparing learners for dealing with the demands of academic study in a foreign language. These aspects of the course are discussed in further detail in the following sections of this paper.

The Design Features of English-2

English-2 is the second of the two freshman English courses offered at Doğuş University and it aims to provide the students with the opportunity of practising and further improving the reading and writing skills that they have acquired in *English-1*. A second aim of the course is to equip the students with the necessary study skills that they will be employing throughout their university education.

In order to achieve these aims, students are taken through the stages of conducting academic research and presenting the findings of their research in the form of a written project. These stages comprise choosing an appropriate research topic and conducting research on it by means of using library skills and IT facilities, preparing and conducting questionnaires and interviews, reading and taking notes from the sources found, making use of quotations and referencing in writing, paraphrasing, summarising and synthesising information from various sources. At the end of the semester, students are required to submit the final product of their work, a written project which appropriately fulfills academic standards in terms of both quality and quantity.

The course is designed on a three-hour-per-week basis, which is used for the introduction and guided practice of the above mentioned sub-skills. In addition to these class-contact hours, each student is allocated a time slot within the weekly programme to have tutorials with their instructors on a one-to-one basis. Students make use of these tutorial sessions to get feedback and advice on the work that they have done within that week.

The design of the course requires the students to work on a weekly basis throughout the semester for the completion of their project work: students are responsible for submitting an assignment each week and these assignments demand the application

of the skills introduced and practised in class on their own project work. When the skill of reading and note-taking is practised in class for example, students are asked to submit the photocopies of the texts that they have read on their research topic together with the notes they have taken from these sources.

Learner-centredness as the Design Principle of English-2

The starting point in the design of this course was the identification of the current abilities of the students with respect to their previous learning experiences in the target language. Having already taken English-1, which is a pre-requisite for taking *English-2*, students were already provided with some opportunities of practice in a great deal of the sub-skills of reading and writing. Hence, there was little purpose in spending course time on the presentation and practice of these discrete sub-skills. Instead, *English-2* aimed at incorporating these already practised sub-skills in such a way that students would inevitably employ them for the purpose of fulfilling the requirements of the newly introduced, higher-level skills. In the case of reading for example, students -consciously or not- employ the sub-skills of skimming and scanning, which have already been practised in English-1, in order to look for and select relevant sources on their research topic, simply because they do not have time to read all the books they can find on that topic or do a detailed reading of hundreds of web-site pages that they come across while searching on the Internet.

Hence, as the learners are involved in the practice of a higher-level skill, that is doing research on a particular topic, they employ the skills that they have already acquired in the previous course. This aspect of the course design not only allows for the required continuity in language education -which can be defined as the gradation and sequencing of skills in such a way that they are built on those that go before, but also enables students to feel that they have made progress moving from one course to another, which is considered to be an important motivational factor in learning a foreign language.

1. Assessment of Learners' Needs

Another important stage in the design process of the course was the assessment of the learners' needs and the learning situations in which they will need to use the target language. Informal interviews conducted with students and colleagues from other departments have revealed the fact that students studying at various departments of Doğuş University are and will be involved in doing research and preparing written assignments, reports or projects of all kinds in a great deal of the courses that they are to take throughout their university education. Therefore, the skills of reading and writing were given priority in the design of the course, together with the aim of helping learners develop some learning strategies that they can employ while dealing with the demands of the other courses they will take in their academic studies. To put it in other words, *English-2* was designed around the basic principle of providing the students with a "rehearsal" of the real-world tasks in which they will be using the target language and by that means, authenticity and real-world focus in task types, which are the key elements of CLT and the Learner-Centred approach, were incorporated into the design of the course.

2. Allowing Learners Choices in Learning

In addition to the above mentioned aspects of the course, *English-2* also allows

for the fulfillment of another criterion in Nunan's list of "the good communicative lesson" quoted previously and this is allowing learners choices in learning. The design of the course requires learners to work on the same topic throughout the semester. Therefore, there was a consensus of opinion among the Degree English lecturers at the design stage of the course about not having any restrictions in the choice of topics, mainly because working on an "imposed" topic for such a long time could be quite a tedious task on the part of the learners and would affect the students' motivation and performance in a negative way.

Hence, in the first week of the course, students are asked to choose a topic that they want to learn more about and would be interested in doing some research on. This flexibility in the choice of topics not only allows learners to work on textual materials that are interesting to them, but may also cater for the specific learning goals and needs of the students in real-life situations in cases when learners choose to work on topics that are relevant to their own field of study. If an Industrial Engineering student chooses to work on the topic of "using solar energy in car manufacture" , or an International Relations student chooses to work on "Turkey's relations with the European Union" for example, their research can help them deepen their knowledge in the relevant study area both in terms of content and vocabulary, as well as enabling them to practise the language-related learning goals set for the purposes of this course.

3. Authenticity of Textual Materials

In contrast to conventional language courses in which language learning materials consist of textbooks specifically written for this purpose and/or materials adapted or developed by the teachers, in *English- 2* the reading materials that provide the input in terms of content consist of authentic texts which are selected and used directly by the students.

As each student in class has a different research topic to collect information about, students are responsible for finding the sources that are relevant to their own research focus. These sources are mostly the chapters of the books that they find during the stage of library research, articles from journals, magazines and newspapers, the relevant parts of encyclopedias and the texts on the Internet or CD- ROMs. Hence, a great deal of the learning material is purely authentic and is selected and used by the learners themselves.

4. Learners In Charge

The nature of *English- 2* requires the learners to carry out a great majority of the learning tasks on their own and outside class: they are responsible for finding the relevant materials for their research topic, reading it in detail and taking notes from it, conducting interviews and questionnaires to collect data, synthesising it from various sources and presenting the findings of their research in the form of a written

project, following the academic conventions of writing.

While carrying out all these tasks they are constantly involved in the use of the target language and – consciously or not – they employ some metacognitive, cognitive and affective strategies of learning, which help them develop skills in "learning how to learn" and raise their awareness of language learning and the use of the language, itself.

Thus, these experiences in learning provide the necessary input for learner training and allow learners to form their own strategies of learning, which is a considerable step towards becoming autonomous learners.

5. The Roles of Teachers

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

They are "planners" in the meaning that they are the ones who make decisions on how the work should be divided into manageable chunks and build on each other in a graded manner. Also, they set the deadlines for the completion of each component as timing is an important factor in a work such as this and the majority of the students at this level do not have such well-developed time-management skills.

They are also "counsellors" as they constantly provide feedback and advice on the section of the work that the students have completed, within and outside class during the tutorial sessions. They give feedback on various aspects of the students' work, such as its content, organisation, grammar and vocabulary.

Last but not least, they are "helpers" as they develop the skills that are new to them. They provide opportunities for guided-practice in class for the skills that the students will employ outside class, individually. They introduce research techniques and methods and give information on certain aspects of writing research projects.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at assessing the role of a "learner – centred" approach in language teaching in the development of learner - autonomy by means of examining the principles and design features of a freshman year English course, namely *English-2*, offered at Doğuş University. It is argued in this paper that this course promotes learner autonomy as it is designed in accordance with the principles of CLT and learner-centredness in language education.

Another argument presented in this paper is that language education is not only a matter of teaching the use of the language in a specific skill; it should also be concerned with helping learners develop some learning strategies related to the process of learning, which they can employ in their further education. The rationale

behind this second argument has been illustrated by Rogers very clearly: "The man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of *seeking* knowledge gives a basis for security" (Rogers quoted in Dickinson, 1987:34).

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