

Power to the learner

Kat Robb suggests how teachers and learners can benefit by switching the focus.



If we stop and take a moment to consider what 'learner-centred approaches in the classroom' means to each one of us, it is the perfect opportunity to engage in some self-reflection regarding our own teaching practices, and consider to what degree the learner really is at the centre of our teaching, or whether we just think they are. By this, I mean, that with all good intentions, teachers endeavour to ensure the learning objectives set out for lessons are met, and consequently this 'means', learning is taking place, and the learners have been at the centre of that learning. If we take another moment to consider

factors such as teacher talk time, and teacher listening time, we may in fact realise that learners are not in fact the focus of the lesson, as teachers dedicate lesson time to give lengthy examples in context, and talk, a lot. I remember at the end of a course I taught at a Japanese university, the students designed a game where they chose to impersonate someone from the class talking in English, myself included, for the other learners to guess. A very brave student decided to imitate me, and it was quite an eye-opening experience. On another occasion, I allowed a class to take the lesson themselves, and in

turns students volunteered to teach, again mimicking what they had seen me do on a daily basis. On both occasions a distinctively teacher-centred approach was evident, and this was something I needed to address. Self-reflection is a very humbling experience, and powerful tool.

Student ownership of learning

This article addresses some of the main points I presented during a plenary talk I gave at the InnovateELT conference in Barcelona in 2016, entitled 'Power

to the learner'. I discussed the idea of students taking ownership of their own learning, and how this is possible. I strongly believe a key element to being informed about student needs is to ask them. While a needs analysis should be an integral part of the beginning of all courses, this often takes a more global view. Asking learners to write you a letter about their expectations during the course, where they think they are now, and where they would like to be by the end of the course serves two purposes. Firstly, you will have a documented piece of writing from each learner that can be used as a barometer to evaluate future writing and progress. Secondly, you are providing learners with the opportunity to express themselves without the inhibition of doing it in front of a new class. You can allow learners to share their ideas with each other after writing, in an informal open discussion. It is then your job as a teacher to glean the letters to become more aware of the learners' expectations, and indeed their needs.

Reflective practice, mindfulness & self-awareness of learning

The way the learner needs are addressed in the classroom should also focus on the learners, putting them at the nucleus of the activities. For example, asking learners how they would like to practise specific language or skills, how they would feel more comfortable learning a language element, or how they would execute an activity. This could then lead into a reflective practice activity whereby in a learning journal learners note if the approach used was effective. This helps elucidate the learning objectives that were initially set out to be met in the needs analysis letters. In the same way, a learning journal can also be used for each learner to outline both long-term and short-term learning objectives. This serves as a personal reminder, or logbook, for what they want to achieve during the course, and can be shared with the teacher with the intention of both ensuring their objectives are met and keeping a student-centred focus during lessons.

If we are able to foster a learning environment of conscious learning, with learners mindfully specifying what activities they find useful and why, they could transition from a traditional passive learner role to a more active role, and we could be halfway there to adopting a more learner-centred approach. This can be as simple as deliberate and purposeful thinking at the end of a lesson about preferences, and communicating this to the teacher, in a form of reflective practice. At the heart of reflective practice is the notion of what we do and why we do it. When we reflect on the past we identify action points for future teaching practice, in the form of action research. Reflective practice is powerful for both teachers, but primarily learners. By making learners self-aware, they become more present in the active learning dynamic within the classroom.

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Creativity in the classroom

Many contexts and cultures focus on the teacher as the font of all knowledge in the classroom, and this tends to create a divide between teachers and learners that has a trickle-down effect on learner expectations. Motivations for learning a language may be varied, but essentially the fundamental aim is for communication. Often this aim is forgotten, so I therefore suggest promoting social interaction and sharing of knowledge and ideas in open class discussions. This helps to break down barriers and avoids creating an invisible wall between

learners and teachers by helping to harbour a more learner-led approach to learning. If learners are given the opportunity to give feedback and make suggestions, then we as teachers can help ensure that learners are at the forefront of the teaching approaches we choose to adopt. By giving learners a voice and in turn a choice in the classroom, we can be more mindful of their needs and better meet them. I suggest creativity with activities and ideas, and allowing learners the freedom to learn what interests them and what they deem purposeful to meet their learning goals.

While I appreciate this more 'grassroots' approach to teaching and learning may quite possibly be easier said than done, I do feel that it is possible to experiment with it, to see how it can be implemented and what the learning outcomes are as a result. This could be something like a five-minute post-class discussion to what learners feel they learned from the class, and how they could have learned more. While this is perhaps a difficult question to answer, it does indeed provide learners with the opportunity to reflect and have a say in what they did. A simple question to enquire if they enjoyed an activity can also be considered as a learner-centred approach, as it informs the teacher, who can base future teaching decisions on the responses.



Kat Robb has been involved in ELT since 1995 and is based in Barcelona, Spain. She is a teacher trainer, teacher, speaker and writer. She teaches all Cambridge main-suite exams, in addition to tutoring on the Cambridge exams, EAP & IELTS online teacher development courses run by Oxford TELF where she also tutors on the Trinity Dip TESOL. She is a seminar presenter for Cambridge Assessment English in Spain, and regularly contributes to new Cambridge projects. She shares her ideas at conferences, on her blog: englishandtech.com and on Twitter.