

Research Article

Learner- or Teacher-centered Instruction: Student Teachers' Preference and the Role of Their English Proficiency

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Abstract.

EFL student teachers should support learner-centered approach to learning because it developed autonomy and benefited them in life-long pursuit of knowledge. However, anecdotal evidence showed that some student teachers still preferred teacher-centered approach. This mixed-method study was conducted to find out: (1) whether there was a significant relationship between the preference of learner- or teacher-centered instructions and the student teachers' English proficiency; and (2) why student teachers support teacher-centered instruction. Numeric data were collected from 51 participants by means of a structured questionnaire and test of English proficiency (TEP), whereas the qualitative data were obtained from an unstructured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the preference of learner- or teacher-centered instructions were not significantly associated with their English proficiency. In addition, the student teachers preferred teacher-centered instruction for three reasons, fixed mindset, difficulties in understanding materials, and comprehensible explanations given by the teacher educators. Based on these findings, further research about this issue was recommended.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary." (Thomas Carruthers)

In language teaching, teacher-centered instruction is usually associated with the traditional methods, such as Grammar Translation Method [1] and Audio-lingual Method [2]. For the last four decades, however, educators have attempted to shift the focus of the teaching learning process from the teacher to the learners [3] [4] [5] [6]. Learners should construct knowledge in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) by interacting with others and using various resources rather than relying on the teacher to transfer the linguistic knowledge to them [7] [8] [9]. It's better to make the foreign language instructions more learner-centered and assign the role of a facilitator to the teacher. The teacher facilitates language learning by providing scaffolds [10] [11] [12] [13] and

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training the learners to mobilize various language learning strategies [14] [15] [16] [17] [18]. The scaffolds and the use of language learning strategies enable the learners to be increasingly independent in gaining knowledge and language skills. As stated in the above quotation, in time the learners develop autonomy and need little or no guidance from the teacher in language classrooms.

Although learner autonomy is most frequently recognized as a characteristic of learner-centered instructions, there are five other aspects that characterize learner-centeredness: active participation, relevant skills, adapting to the need, power sharing and formative assessment [19]. The learning activities encourage the learners to participate actively in the classroom by interacting with others, such as group work or project-based learning [20]. In doing these activities, the learners develop relevant skills, i.e. higher-order thinking skills to improve their critical thinking and creativity [21] as well as real-life skills that enable them to apply what they have learned in the classroom to different situations outside the classroom. The activities are designed to adapt to the learners' prior knowledge, needs and interests instead of being predetermined by the teacher in top-down fashion. The teacher also assigns more power to the learners by involving them in deciding the materials they need to learn, how to learn these materials and how to assess the learners' proficiency, ability and comprehension. The assessment is process-oriented so the teacher performs formative assessment continuously throughout the language program, such as portfolios [22] [23], self- and peer assessment [24] [25], and observation [26].

To ensure teachers understand their role as facilitators in learner-centered instructions, they should develop the mindset that values learner autonomy and constructivist language teaching early during pre-service teacher training in universities [27]. In Indonesia, the pre-service teacher training is carried out within the framework of social constructivism, enabling the student teachers to construct knowledge independently after interacting with others [28]. This paves the way for learner autonomy among the student teachers when contributing factors also support this process as stated below.

Autonomy ... is not an all-or-nothing concept. The ability of individuals to take responsibility for their own affairs (in this case language learning) will be largely determined by the context in which the learning takes place. Contextual factors impinging upon learning will include the age and proficiency level of the students, previous and current educational experiences, the goals of the language program, and the attitude and training of the teacher [29].

The present paper focuses on one of the aforementioned factors, namely, the proficiency level. Common sense tells us that the more proficient student teachers tend

to have a higher degree of autonomy in learning because they usually know very well how to mobilize learning strategies when encountering problems. Due to their ability to regulate their own learning, they hardly need guidance or assistance from the teacher educators and generally succeed in achieving the learning objectives. To my best knowledge, however, empirical evidence about this issue has not been published elsewhere so the present study attempted to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between the learner-centeredness and English proficiency.

The study aimed to find out whether the student teachers' preference for learner-centered or teacher-centered instruction was significantly correlated with their English proficiency. In addition, the study also sought to explore the reasons for preferring teacher-centered instruction from the student teachers' perspectives. The procedures of conducting the study will be described in the next section, followed by the findings and discussion. This paper will end with the conclusion and recommendation for further research.

2. METHOD

The current research was a mixed-methods study which attempted to find out the correlation between the student teachers' preference and their English proficiency by using quantitative approach, as well as to describe the reasons underlying their preference by means of qualitative approach. The population of the study included EFL student teachers who were taking *ELT Methods* and *ELT Assessment* courses in a state university in Indonesia (N=92). They were approached as the potential participants of the study because they were going to do teaching practicum in less than one year and, therefore, should be facilitated to make their teaching more learner-centered. Although all of them were invited to participate in this study, only some agreed to take part as the sample of the study (N=51). To protect their identity and respect their privacy, the researcher assigned a pseudonym for each of them.

The data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, two instruments were used: a structured questionnaire and the Test of English Proficiency (TEP). The online questionnaire elicited the participants' preferred approach to learning by having them select one of three learning activities in the above courses: (1) The teacher educator explains the materials to the student teachers, and the student teachers may ask questions if they don't understand; (2) The teacher educator asks questions about the materials to guide the students' learning, and the students read books or search the internet to find the answers; or (3) The student teachers present the materials in groups, and the teacher

educator gives comments and feedback near the end of the sessions. Choosing the first option means the participants preferred the teacher-centered approach, and they were assigned a code of 0. On the other hand, opting for the second or third option shows they valued the learner-centered approach more highly and were labeled as 1. The second instrument was a paper-based English proficiency test that measured the participants' reading comprehension, listening comprehension and grammar ability. They took the test at the Language Center of the university and got a score ranging from 0 to 700. In the second stage, data were collected only from student teachers who preferred teacher-centered instruction (N=27). They completed an unstructured questionnaire by explaining in detail why they chose teacher-centered instruction over learner-centered instruction. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of them (N=6) to gain in-depth understanding about the reasons.

The use of TEP and the questionnaire resulted in numeric data. The data from TEP were scores which indicated the participants' English proficiency, while the questionnaire yielded dichotomous data which showed whether they preferred learner-centered or teacher-centered instructions. Correlation between both sets of data were computed by means of Point Biserial formula to find out if their preferences were associated with the levels of English proficiency. The unstructured questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews yielded qualitative data. To analyze the data, the researcher categorized and coded them in a table, then searched for patterns from the similar reasons articulated by the participants. Finally, she interpreted the data by drawing conclusions about the reasons and mapping them against the theory.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The computation of Point Biserial coefficient indicated no significant correlation between opting for learner- or teacher-centered instructions and English proficiency ($r=.26$, $p<.05$). Thus, the participants' preference for the learner-centered instructions over the teacher-centered ones was not significantly associated with their English proficiency (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Correlation between preference and English proficiency.

Groups	N	\bar{X}	SD	r
Learner-centered	24	434	45.6	.26
Teacher-centered	27	404	67.8	

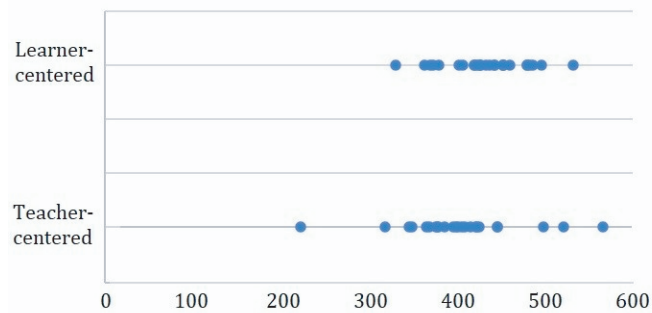


Figure 1: Correlation chart.

Therefore, the claim stating the English proficiency of the student teachers was one of the factors that contributed to autonomy in learner-centered instructions was not supported in this study. Interestingly, the student teacher who scored the highest (567) in TEP belonged to the group which preferred teacher-centered approach, and so did the student teacher who got the lowest score (223) (Figure 1). This fact underlined the above finding about the insignificant correlation between learner-centeredness and English proficiency, and deserved an explanation as to why the more proficient student teachers considered a teacher-centered class more efficacious when they had sufficient linguistic knowledge to learn independently.

The questionnaire and the interviews revealed three reasons for supporting teacher-centered instruction: their mindset, the difficulties they faced in understanding the materials, and the comprehensible explanations given by the teacher educators. Of these three reasons, the first one caused the gravest problem because it was not easy to change their mindset. For example, Luluk perceived herself as "... the type of person who learns to be explained first. I can't understand the material just by studying alone, so I need the lecturer to explain the material. After that, if there is an explanation that is not clear, I will ask it." She had a fixed mindset and believed that receiving knowledge from the teacher educators was the only way she learned. A fixed mindset is a belief that capabilities are inborn and, therefore, unchangeable; by contrast, a growth mindset is possessed by a person who believes that such capabilities develop through experience, strategies and interaction with others [30]. When student teachers found comfort in spoon feeding in the classroom and were reluctant to make good use of their potentials and capabilities to learn independently during teacher training, it would be very challenging for them to facilitate their pupils' learning by using learner-centered approach in the future teaching career.

Their support of teacher-centered instruction also arose from the problems they had in understanding the materials that they perceived as 'hard.' They were freshmen when

taking the content courses, and some of them struggled to comprehend the concepts about ELT methods and assessment while they were still grappling with English. Didu thought that “The materials in this course are new and a little bit difficult for me. And I need something like guidance from the lecturer to understand.” Similarly, Ratri explained that “It is kind of hard to understand the materials before the lecturer explains it, and not every subject material is easy to understand if we read/study it by ourselves without being given the basic concept.” Another student teacher, Cahyo, even reported that “I realized this when I was going to study for the mid-term. It is hard for me to understand the material presented by the groups, for I need to read their separate PPT slides one-by-one.” These participants shared one thing in common, i.e. lack of learning strategy use. Learning strategies are procedures or techniques deliberately deployed by learners to facilitate learning when they encounter problems [31] [32] [33]. Obviously Didu and Ratri were aware of the difficulties in grasping the materials, but they had little or no knowledge about learning strategies and resorted to the teacher educators as the only solution to the problem. Cahyo, however, apparently selected the inappropriate learning strategy to cope with the hard materials. Instead of learning the concepts in depth from the textbooks assigned by the teacher educators, he read the slides containing the key points presented by his peers in class discussion. When he found that this strategy did not work, he considered it as the teacher educators’ responsibility to make him understand.

Lastly, the participants’ support for teacher-centered instruction grew stronger when they attended the classes of teacher educators who knew how to make complicated concepts easier to understand through explanations. According to Yanto, “... if the lecturer explains the material carefully, the students will understand quickly. And if they don’t, they can ask to the lecturer and the lecturer answers directly. This is the most effective learning activity in my opinion.” In the same vein, Alisa expressed her views as follows, “Every lecturer must have an interesting way to explain the material so that the students have better understanding. Besides, lecturers also certainly have a much higher understanding of knowledge than their students, so when students feel they don’t really understand, they can ask the lecturer directly.” Due to the teacher educators’ extensive knowledge and effective teaching techniques, Danu even had much faith in and relied on their explanations by stating, “I understand better if the lecturer explains, and if I ask the lecturer, the answers given are more guaranteed to be true.” These participants exemplified a phenomenon called *learned helplessness*, which Hansen and Stephens [34] described as follows.

Years of passive note-taking and silent absorption of information have convinced many students that this is the appropriate way to learn. Combined with a climate in which students' class preparation at home has become an almost negligible activity ..., this atmosphere has taught students that they can rely almost exclusively on the instructor to tell them what they need to know (p. 42).

The student teachers believed that they had little capability of learning independently because they were accustomed to receiving knowledge and skills from their teachers in primary and secondary education. By the time they attended the university for teacher training, they felt 'helpless' in using learner-centered approach to learning because of lengthy exposure to teacher-centered approach at schools.

Exploring their reasons for preferring teacher-centered instruction above was by no means done to tolerate it. On the contrary, language teaching should mainly embrace learner-centered approach because "...teaching is not so much a process of cramming outside knowledge into the learner's mind as of drawing out the knowledge that each of our students has within him" [35]. The student teachers should share power with the teacher educators and regulate their own learning [36]. It not only enables them to make optimum use of their capability and experience to gain knowledge, but also equips them with lifelong learning skills [37]. Due to these benefits, teacher educators should continue championing learner-centered approach. Understanding why the student teachers wish to do the opposite can assist the teacher educators to take the appropriate actions that change the student teachers' mindset and encourage them to be more learner-centered both in the present teacher training and their future teaching career.

4. CONCLUSION

This research investigated the English proficiency of student teachers as it related to learner-centered instruction. The results showed that there was no significant relationship between their preference for learner- or teacher-centered instruction and their English proficiency. Thus, the statement that English proficiency was one of the factors that contributed to learner-centered instructions was not supported in this study. Some student teachers preferred teacher-centered instruction rather than learner-centered instruction for three reasons: they had a fixed mindset, found it hard to understand the materials and felt comfortable with the teacher educators' clear explanations. After knowing the reasons underlying their support for teacher-centered instruction, it is recommended that action research be conducted to raise the student teachers' awareness

of learner-centered approach to learning and encourage them to adopt it. Interventions should be done to shift their academic mindset and make them more responsible for their own learning.

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