Teacher as the Change Agent: Implementation and Impact of a Learner-centered Approach in Teaching Argumentative Essays to Senior Secondary ESL Learners in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Key themes in Applied English Linguistics include ESL writing and the quest for suitable instructional approaches. This article investigates the practicability of implementing a learner-centered approach in teaching argumentative writing to senior secondary ESL learners in Hong Kong. This article presents a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest classroom-based research study conducted by a front-line English teacher documenting the effects of utilizing a learner-centered approach on teaching argumentative essay-writing based on the learning needs stated in the initial needs analysis questionnaire filled by the experimental group. Subjects were 60 Secondary Five ESL students in a secondary school with mainly Non-Chinese Speakers in Hong Kong. By collecting quantitative data including the pretest and posttest scores and running descriptive statistical analysis, it was found that a learner-centered teaching approach enhanced learners' motivation and performance in ESL writing. Pedagogical implications are then discussed from the point of view of extending the learner-centered approach to teaching other ESL skills including reading, listening and speaking skills because a learner-centered approach seems to be beneficial to learners with low motivation and lower ability.
Introduction

(A) Background

Learner-centered curriculum is a large area of investigation developed by various professional educators. However, according to the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (2007), the main focus of curriculum development is on ‘School based curriculum’, of which schools are free to design their own approaches of teaching based on the general guidelines of the Education Bureau (EDB). Since this approach is still fresh and at the testing stage in education sector in Hong Kong, there is a need to test its validity in a practical manner before including other areas of ESL teaching and learning.

Also, as most of the subjects are working adults who want to improve themselves and get good results in the public examinations, this learner-centered approach of learning may best suit them. As they are more mature, they could be able to identify their learning needs clearly and they can provide feedback to the teacher using this approach. This can facilitate the research in this area and hence provide possible suggestions for improvement of this program which can pave the way for further implementation of this program in other aspects of English language learning.

(B) Area of investigation

Therefore, this research only applies on the writing part of ESL teaching. In this research, Several aspects on the implementation of learner-centered curriculum to local secondary school ESL students would be investigated, including:
1. Students’ interest in ways of learning writing skills;
2. The impact of implementing a learner-centered approach of teaching on students’ learning outcomes;
3. The impact of implementing learner-centered approach of teaching on students’ motivation of learning.

Literature review

The main focus for this research would be the implementation of a ‘learner-centered curriculum’. The word ‘implementation’ refers to ‘realization of an application, or execution of a plan, idea, model, design or specification, etc.’ (Ellis, 1994, p.11), and this research study was to ‘plan and design’ as well as evaluate the learner-centered curriculum. According to Burton (1987), there are three main foci in a learner-centered curriculum. First, it focuses on the individual learner.
Second, the materials should be selected from various sources since the teaching methodology may not suitable for every student. Third, it focuses on how to train students to deal with practical needs in the society. The same view is shared by Nunan (1997, p.5) who views that this curriculum involves ‘collaborative effort between teachers and learners since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process on the content of the curriculum’.

But before implementing such a curriculum, a needs analysis should be conducted in order to identify the ‘language proficiency and literacy’ of students (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Needs analysis is common for teachers who teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a tool to assess the needs and ability of students in different settings (Dudley-Evans, 1998). In a needs analysis questionnaire, there are mainly two parts—current situation and expected situation, assisted by some questions on how the students would like the teachers to conduct the course (Dudley-Evans, 1998). In this research, the types of questions will be set according to secondary school setting and focus on the writing part of English. Only the concepts of a needs analysis will be used but not the format of it because the questions should be set according to the junior students’ level and so the language and format cannot be too sophisticated.

The questions in the needs analysis were set according to the content that was to be covered in the writing lessons and different methods of assessments and course design with reference to various journal articles. For example, in the needs analysis for this research, the first part of the interview was adopted from Dudley-Evans (1998)’s sample ‘Pre-course information questionnaire’ on the background information of participation in the course. Question 5 on students’ knowledge on writing an essay is to check their understanding towards ESL writing skills. This is essential as suggested by Ferris & Hedgcock (2005), before the design of the course, teachers must know their understanding towards the target knowledge so that the teachers can develop the teaching materials accordingly. As for the expected situation part in the needs analysis, the questions on how the students like to learn writing skills was based on several concepts adopted from McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) and Reid (1993). McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) suggest that asking students to hand in drafts and provide instant feedback can draw the motivation for instant and ‘substantive revision’ so as to allow students to have chances to express their opinions quickly which enhance their learning and motivation to learn. The same view is shared by Reid (1993) that students would be more interested in revising their drafts in order to
present their better piece of work to the others and students would be more confident in their works if they are given chances to revise their work under suitable instructions.

According to Dudley-Evans (1998), every learner-centered course needs to have feedback and assessment in order to check if the course is conducted according to the needs analysis and whether it achieved the expected outcome of participants. Course evaluation for motivation change and understanding checking will be conducted at the end of the course, as suggested by Shin (2003), a ‘reflective teacher’ should not only keep a journal as a lesson record, but conduct course evaluation so as to evaluate on the lessons conducted and make improvement. Here, the authors of the article disagree with the concept of writing an entry at the end of course evaluation. This is not applicable to the current research as this research focus on learner-centered teaching, the teachers’ own assumption may not help to improve the quality of the course and to evaluate the overall performance of students (Shin, 2003). Therefore, in the research, the end of course questionnaire has been set, apart from the end-of-unit writing.

Research questions

Set against the background that has been examined, the present study aimed to investigate the practicability of implementing a learner-centered approach in teaching argumentative writing to senior secondary ESL learners in Hong Kong. The specific research questions are:

1. What were the preferred ways of students in learning writing skills?
2. Would students be highly motivated if they can learn according to their own preference and needs?
3. Would students have a better understanding towards the subject matter and improve their academic results if they can learn according to their own preference and needs?

Research design and methodology

(a) Subjects
Students included 60 students from two Form 5 classes from a secondary school that mainly admits Non-Chinese Students (an Affordable International School) in Hong Kong. This school was selected on the basis of convenience and the writers’ sufficient
knowledge and understanding with the students as the teacher-researchers have had nearly 5 years of contact with them. One class received the learner-centered approach of instruction while the other class received the teacher-centered approach. Both courses lasted for 4 lessons in 4 weeks. Each lesson comprised one hour.

(b) Procedures

The analysis started with students’ essay writing. The two groups of students would write up one piece of essay with a given topic closely related to their life: the negative effects of playing computer games. The writing time was limited to 50 minutes and they were informed that this was part of a research study of educational purpose, but not to mention the pieces of writing would have no effect to their examination results in order to maintain their motivation. This test served the initial test for the research.

Questionnaires (Needs analysis) were then given at the beginning of the course as the foundation for further analysis. A set of questionnaires were distributed and the students were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire which included their learning behavior on English writing and the advice on their preferred way of learning. The questionnaire aims at collecting information of 1) Students’ own ways of handling writing questions; 2) Students’ preferred mode of learning; 3) Preferred content of learning materials. The questions are used to finding out the desired ways of learning to fulfill the needs of the students.

Sets of teaching material were developed according to the students’ responses collected from the questionnaires. It is believed that a more learner-centered design for the materials would better arouse students’ learning interest on writing.

The two groups of students were then divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group was given instructions according to the materials with emphasis on students’ opinions and preferences stated in the needs analysis questionnaires. To be exact, the material chosen were also ‘suggestive’ rather than ‘definitive’ (see appendix), acting as a model for teachers to develop their own variations, which is the nature of the learner-centred curriculum (Nunan, 1989); the other group would be taught in a more traditional or conventional chalk-and-board method without the implementation of a learner-centered approach. It is thought that the students’ performances can be compared by using this format.
Yet, the school authority did not allow the video-taping of lessons in class. Therefore, in order to look at the situation of lessons, teacher’s observation was used to serve this function. It is believed that since the first author of the article was the one who delivered the course, he would be more sensitive towards the understanding of students and their learning needs as well as their abilities.

Furthermore, 4 sets of interviews were conducted. There were 2 sets of individual interviews and 2 sets of focus group interviews, and all of them were based on the questions at the end of evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix 3). Participants of the focus groups were selected from the experimental group in order to have a better understanding on students' attitude towards the course. On the other hand, the participants of individual interviews were selected in a random basis from both the control group as well as the experimental group in order to gather feedback from both groups. Interviewing was selected as the research method because it was the appropriate method to understand students’ thoughts in a greater detail. Further analysis would be taken by transcribing the recorded data.

Evaluation sheets were given to all students participating in the research study to obtain the feedback opinion of the students. It was designed in a questionnaire format with questions covering different aspects of teaching and learning in the implementation of learner-centered curriculum. This questionnaire aimed at obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of students’ own personal reflection towards the introduced way of teaching.

After that, an end-of-unit test was taken. The teacher asked the students from both groups to complete another piece of writing which shared a same topic with the one before the research study. This procedure was believed to be able to provide evidence of students’ progress after the implementation of learner-centered approach of teaching.

To sum up, the flow of the study could be expressed in a flow chart as follows:

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial test</th>
<th>Needs Analysis</th>
<th>Implementation of Learner-Centered Curriculum (Experimental group)</th>
<th>Evaluation and end-of-unit Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No intervention or board and chalk talk (Control Group)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(c) Data analysis

In the post-course analysis, 4 sets of materials were used for the complete analysis in this project, namely: 1) Needs Analysis questionnaires, 2) teacher observation form, 3) initial and final test paper and 4) end-of-unit evaluation form.

The results of the needs analysis questionnaires would be processed right after data collection. The questionnaires were grouped and analyzed carefully. This would prevent the potential setbacks of qualitative analysis of being subjective in the process of analysis.

The initial and final test papers were used to identify students’ abilities and performance before and after the course.

Teacher observation forms were used to analyze student’s motivation throughout the lessons in both the experimental and control groups. Teacher noted the class atmosphere as well as students’ responses when delivering lessons with sets of materials that were suggested by the students in the questionnaire.

Students’ writings were analyzed and evaluated with the marking scheme of HKDSE writing rubrics. The results were analyzed from the following aspects, including the structure of writing, the organization of writing and forming ideas. The rubric was important to assess students’ performance as well as the impact of implementing the learner-centered curriculum to the experimental group.

The end-of-unit evaluation forms were used to cross-check students’ motivation and learning atmosphere as stated in the teacher observation form. Questions consisted of their perception on writing after receiving the learner-centered approach of teaching and their knowledge on writing argumentative essays after the course. These kinds of knowledge testing could also cross-check the validity of the improvement or performance in the initial and post course writing test.

Results and discussion

(a) Needs Analysis

The aim of this analysis was to identify students’ needs and their learning behaviour in English. The format of this needs analysis was modified from the needs analysis form in Teaching ESL Writing (Reid, 1993) because of its comprehensiveness. This kind of needs analysis also serves the function of knowing what we did not know,
not wasting our students' time, appearing much more professional and knowing how we should analyse the data (Reid, 1993). On the other hand, other than these, another crucial point of using this analysis is that whenever data is being collected, is to know beforehand what will happen to the raw data and to the information derived from it. Therefore, a further discussion can be facilitated in the later part of this research to serve this purpose. There were altogether 60 forms received (30 from control group and 30 from experimental group).

Here are some of the important questions stated in the questionnaire and their results:

![Chart 1: Do you like writing in English? Why or why not?](image1)

![Chart 2: What is your handling procedure when faced with writing questions?](image2)

![Chart 3: How would you like to learn writing skills?](image3)

From the above results, it is suggested that students had more anxiety in writing in English than other aspects in learning English. They had very limited chances to learn English apart from the English lessons. They also regarded English as a tool only for their career and many of them did not truly want to learn English for interest. Moreover, most of the students wanted to improve their forming ideas in writing essays as well as organization. They may have already realized that it would be hard to improve their language within a short period of time. Judging from their learning behavior, it is suggested that students in general had very limited exposure in learning English through visual
aids and they seldom had the chance to develop ideas with teachers directly.

(b) Initial test (Without giving grades)

After the needs analysis questionnaires, students were given the initial test. The assessment rubric was Grammar, Organization and forming ideas. The topic was ‘Physical Education should be made compulsory in schools’. After the extensive marking of the test, both groups were proven to have similar abilities. Students had weak understanding on the structure of an argumentative essay and they lacked language abilities and ideas to express themselves in the essay.

(c) Teacher Observation (Delivery of the course)

Instruction for the control group with teacher-centered approach: Students in this group were quite shy in answering questions asked by the teacher, like what the model essay was about. Some students lacked motivation as they were just given structured notes, a draft paper and model essays. Some of them gave up the lesson and did something else in the lesson which may cause behavioural problems at the same time.

Instruction for the experimental group with learner-centered approach: Students were attracted by the PowerPoint slides possibly because of the visual impact. Also, students were more willing to answer questions. Some students even copied down the points that the first author of the article made in analyzing the model essays. Moreover, they took the initiative to ask questions in Cantonese like repeating the main points that the first author had advised to seek confirmation. It is obvious that students were more motivated in attend the experiential lessons.

(d) End-of-unit test

The aim of this test was to test the effectiveness of the approach and compare the results of students receiving different teaching approaches. A question with the same format as the initial test was given to students as the End-of-unit test. It is because the results could hopefully be easier to compare if the format (elements) of both tests are the same.

Experimental Group: Most of them did improve when compared with the initial test. But those that under-performed in the initial test
attained greater improvement and the quality of their pieces kept up with the rest of the class. It may be because the teacher provided face-to-face support in forming ideas and drafting essays so that they were motivated to write something for the sake of the public exam later on. For those students who performed better in the first test, probably because they lacked grammatical accuracy and sentence forming skills and this course mainly focused on the organization and forming ideas in writing essays, according to the needs analysis.

Control Group: Students' performance was as expected. Students improved in terms of organization and forming ideas, but for the low achievers in the first test, it seemed that they did not have improvement, probably because they lacked motivation or the lessons were too boring for them, such as examining the model essays with lecturing and some planning.

(e) End-of-unit evaluation

The aim of this evaluation was to evaluate and cross-check the effectiveness of different teaching approaches through receiving written feedback from students apart from the test. There were altogether 60 forms received (30 from control group and 30 from experimental group).

Here are some of the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CONTROL GROUP</th>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1c Do you like writing now? Do you feel that you have achieved something?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1e</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. What areas of writing would you like to know more about after completing the unit of lessons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence forming</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Do you find the teaching methods and content used by the teacher help you to understand more on writing an essay? Why or why not?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, provide good model and they are useful</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, it is boring</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Please write down your understanding of argumentative essay again at the best of your knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTROL GROUP</th>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4c</td>
<td>Q4e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Discuss things on two sides 20%</td>
<td>A. Talk about things on both sides 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Can you tell me once more 20%</td>
<td>B. Persuade the others 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Introduction, body and conclusion 20%</td>
<td>C. Don't know 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I don't know 40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Do you want to have the similar teaching methods applied to other areas of English like reading, speaking and listening?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTROL GROUP</th>
<th>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q5c</td>
<td>Q5e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it is similar to what we learnt before 80%</td>
<td>Yes 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave it blank 20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTROL GROUP | EXPERIMENTAL GROUP
---|---
6. Can you suggest some ways to improve the course?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q6c</th>
<th>Q6e</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>More model essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More vocabulary items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experimental group: Students viewed that the new (learner-centered) approach of teaching writing was quite successful although they did not show a sheer ‘passion’ in writing right after the lesson. The PowerPoint slides grabbed their attention and they were more confident in writing the piece of essay with teacher guidance in essay planning and forming ideas.

Control group: Students viewed that the conventional (teacher-centered) approach was generally okay and the approach was similar to what they faced when they were in the daytime secondary schools. However this approach was quite boring and some of the students were playing cards at the back of the classroom. They did not think their interest in writing would be enhanced after that writing lesson.

Both groups had a rough idea on what an argumentative essay was and they deemed that they could handle the next piece of essay with what they have learnt in the lesson.

Conclusion

The results show the success of the implementation of a learner-centered approach in helping students improve the writing performance in argumentative essays. The first author developed materials with reference to students’ preference in the needs analysis.
The teacher-researcher then delivered the materials and jotted down his observation in class. Later, the teacher-researcher evaluated the effectiveness of this course through an end-of-unit test and evaluation forms. Generally speaking, students had greater improvement in both learning motivation and performance after receiving the learner-centered instructional approach, as shown in the evaluation forms and end-of-unit test scores. Therefore, the pedagogical implications will be to extend the learner-centered approach to teaching other ESL skills including reading, listening and speaking skills because a learner-centered approach seems to be beneficial to learners with low motivation and lower ability.

Yet, it should be noted that the dynamics and culture of the two classes may affect the validity of this test. The experimental group students were generally more willing to learn and the atmosphere was more welcoming while the control group students were more susceptible to the lack of learning interest and they tended to be more reticent. Therefore, when implementing this approach, the teacher may need to take into consideration of the classroom dynamics whether this approach will be suitable for different learners. This needs further research by frontline ESL teachers and teacher-educators.
References


Appendix 1

Initial Test: Writing task
Time limit: 1 hour
Situation: You are Chris Wong, a student of Happy Secondary School. Since you are one of the top students in the school, your teacher asks you to write an essay on ‘Physical Education should be made compulsory in schools’ and you essay will be posted on the main notice board at school in order to let other students see how clever you are. Write an essay on that topic with no more than 250 words.

Appendix 2

Need Analysis on writing an essay in junior secondary level

Part 1 Current Situation

(A) Background knowledge
1. How much time do you spend on English every day? Please circle the answer.
   A. 0-2 hours   B. <2-4 hours   C. More than 4 hours

2. Do you like English? Please circle the answer.
   [-----------------------------------------------]
   Love          Like         Fair         Hate

3. Do you like writing in English? Why or why not?
   __________________________________________

4. To you, what is the difficulty of writing comparing with reading, speaking and listening in your English learning experience?
   A. It is already very easy
   B. B. I think it is just the same with the others
   C. It is slightly more difficult than the others
   D. It is the hardest one among the others

(B) Operational questions
5. Do you know what any essay is? What is the structure of it? Please write down your understanding at the best of your knowledge.
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
6. What is your handling procedure when faced with writing questions?
   A. Write immediately (just write what you think instantly)
   B. Draw a mind map and then write accordingly
   C. Write a draft on another paper and then copy it into the answer book
   D. Write up a structure of the essay on another paper first and then write a full text on the Answer book with complete sentences and ideas.

Part II Expected situation:

7. Which part of writing do you want to improve more?
   A. Organization
   B. Language structure and usage
   C. Ideas forming

8. How would you like to learn writing skills?
   A. Lecturing → Demonstration of how to handle a question → Writing
   B. Lecturing → Discussion → Group writing
   C. Lecturing → Model essay → Writing
   D. Lecturing → Writing → Draft and correction
   E. Others: (Please specify)

9. Mode of instruction that you preferred: you can circle more than one
   A. Chalk and board
   B. PowerPoint slides
   C. Games
   D. Video Clip on how to learn writing skills

Appendix 3

End of unit evaluation

1. Do you like writing now? Do you feel that you have achieved something?

2. What areas of writing would you like to know more about after completing the unit of lessons?
3. Do you find the teaching methods and content used by the teacher help you to understand more on writing an essay? Why or why not?
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

4. Please write down your understanding of argumentative essay again at the best of your knowledge.
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

5. Do you want to have the similar teaching methods applied to other areas of English like reading, speaking and listening?
_____________________________________________________

6. Can you suggest some ways to improve the course?
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

**Appendix 4 Teacher Observation Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attentiveness</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In these 4 lessons, students were not very attentive. Some of them ignored the instruction of the teacher and did their own things. Maybe the lessons are too boring, some mature students were too tired to be attentive throughout the lesson. Sleeping is common among them.</td>
<td>Since Visual Aids were used, students were quite attentive. Some of them sit straight throughout the lesson. When they were asked to participate in in-class activity, they were more willing to do it. Some students from other classes even join our lessons and become sit-in students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Taking initiative to learn | Students in general are quite shy. They simply did not take initiative to learn actively and simply wait the teacher to spoon-feed knowledge to them. | Students were more active in answering questions raised by the teacher. Some of them even take the chance to ask questions and jot down important points that were made by the teachers. |