

The Insights I Have Gained after Critically Reflecting on Some of My Own Teaching Styles

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Abstract

Though **Pedagogy** is quite commonly known among teachers as an academic discipline, the term **Andragogy** is not. While **Pedagogy** embodies teacher-focused education, **Andragogy** refers to learner-focused education for people of all ages (<http://agelesslearner.com/intros/andragogy.html>). The following article is written out of my own curiosity to find out the effects of these two disciplines on the students whom I have personally taught.

Introduction

One of the popular topics of discussion among today's language teachers is about the effectiveness of two major teaching styles: the teacher-centred approach and the student-centred approach. In fact, more and more teachers now seem to favour the latter as some of the highly regarded researchers nowadays are coming up with their convincing findings to prove the effectiveness of the learner-centred approach. Land, S.M. & Hannafin, M. J. (1997) state in the article they co-author in support of student-centred learning thus: *Direct instruction approaches, as well as the design processes that support them, have been criticized for failing to reflect contemporary research and theory in teaching, learning and technology. Learning systems are needed that encourage divergent reasoning, problem solving, and critical thinking. Student-centered learning environments have been touted as a means to support such processes.* The advantages and disadvantages of both approaches can be studied in books and articles on pedagogy by prominent academics, where they discuss the topic pros and cons. In this paper, however, I will examine some of my classroom activities, both teacher-centred and student-centred, and then evaluate the outcomes resulting from the use of them.

My lessons and my teaching styles

When we draw up our lesson plans, we usually try for a balance of teaching styles that will complement the various learning styles of our students so that they will gain more knowledge, and perform better. However, accommodating each student being hard, we often switch our teaching styles from time to time though the lesson to be taught is basically the same. Of the numerous lessons I have taught to my students, I will select two lessons to discuss the insights I have gained after teaching them both through the teacher-centred approach and the student-centred approach. The two lessons are: (1) the use of the Simple Past tense, and (2) structural positions of phrases and clauses in a sentence, or simply syntactic constructions.

The teaching of the simple past tense using the teacher-centred approach

Like many other language teachers, I sometimes teach this lesson through the traditional teacher-centred instruction technique. This means I provide the students with much of the information they need through explanations and examples. Typically, I start by writing this explanation on the board: **Past Simple indicates an action that took place before the current moment.** Then I provide the students with example sentences to help them understand how to use this tense like:

1. Alexander Bell invented the telephone.
2. Puei Thai won in the 2011 election.
3. I read the newspaper one hour ago.

After that, I orally explain to them that the action took place in the past and is completely finished. Finally, I give them tips that any clause or sentence that contains the indicator of the past time like 'ago', 'yesterday', 'last week', 'in 2009', etc. needs a past verb and warn them that they have to memorize the past form of irregular verbs (i.e. thought, ate, flew, did) as the rule of adding -ed does not apply here. Often, I hand out a list of irregular verbs that students must memorize, accompanied with an exercise.

The teaching of Simple Past tense using the student-centred approach

When I teach my students this lesson using this approach, I do not make any formal explanation with regard to the use of this tense either orally or in writing on the board. Instead, I distribute two short narratives about someone's experiences, each one to half of the class, like the ones given below.

STORY A : Peddling On My Own

Learning how to ride a bike for the first time was a nerve racking independent moment. I was about five years old when my sister informed me that I was too old to still be riding a bike with training wheels. That was the time I decided not to depend on them anymore. Even though I had some doubt, my sister and I went outside and started to take the little wheels off my bike. After my bike went through the transformation, I was now ready for the big moment. With butterflies in my stomach, I slowly got on the bike, and with my shaky hands, I gripped the handles tightly. Meanwhile my sister was holding on to me to help keep my balance. I was so afraid that she would let go, yet I was determined to ride this bike on my own. Next with a little push from her, I started to peddle. The faster my bike went the faster my heart raced. Finally I looked back nervously and noticed that my sister let go of my bike a long time ago. I was so excited that I accomplished freedom on my bike that I forgot to peddle. The next step I remember, I was lying on the ground, yet I did not care because of the adrenaline rush. I will never forget the exhilarating moment and growing up stage of riding a bike without training wheels.

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<http://english120.pbworks.com/w/page/19006987/narrative%20paragraphs>

STORY B : A Once In a Lifetime Experience

The one day I spent in Morocco, Africa, was an experience of a lifetime. When I finally reached Morocco and got off the bus, there were four little girls standing shoeless in the hot sun. After I swallowed my tears, I could not even try to picture this in America as it is not something you often see in the U.S. Meanwhile my tourist guide instructed me not to give them money as it encouraged the children to beg; however, I was wearing four silver bracelets. As I walked over to the girls, their eyes watched my every move. Then I kneeled down to their level while I gave each girl a bracelet. They stood there gleaming at me, for they were pleased. I felt completely in disbelief that this tiny gesture could mean so much. Though this experience was upsetting, and a huge culture shock, it will stay with me forever.

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First, I teach the regular *-ed* form, using verbs that occur in the texts as examples. Pronunciation and doubling rules are also taught if those forms occur in the texts. Since the students need the teacher's help when it comes to the spelling of the irregular verbs, I teach them any verbs that occur in the story. Here my involvement with the teaching of the Past Simple is almost over and it is their turn to read the narratives and ask me questions about the points they do not understand. After reading the story assigned to them, students who have read Story A and those Story B are asked to work in pairs. They are supposed to exchange information from the story they have read and their learning of the Past Simple ends with their writing up or orally repeating the story they have not read.

The teaching of syntactic constructions using the teacher-centred approach

This is the teaching of the syntax of English or English sentence structure in a traditional way. The main difficulty facing our students is that they do not know how to form phrases and clauses, and even though some of them know a little, they do not know how to arrange them systematically in sentences. Therefore, my teaching begins with the analytical explanation of the components of a sentence like this:

What is a phrase?

A group of words, which makes sense, but not complete sense, is called a Phrase. It is a group of related words without a Subject and a Verb.

Words/group of words in italics are phrases in the examples below –

1. *A tall young man* came to see her.
2. I have never seen *a white elephant*.
3. I don't want to go to school *with my sister*.
4. *Smiling pleasantly*, the teacher congratulated his student.
5. I saw John *singing on the stage*.
6. The accident *on the bridge* was serious.
7. The story *has been rewritten*.
8. *It is now raining*.

Analytical explanation follows after the students are made to be aware of the phrases in various forms in the given sentences like: a phrase can be the subject or the object of a sentence like in example 1 and 2; it can also function as adverb or adjective as in examples 3, 4, 5 and 6, or as verbs as in examples 7 and 8. Usually more examples are provided to help them understand better.

What is a clause?

A clause is a part of a sentence that contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought.

The underlined parts in the following sentences are clauses.

1. The door opened and a late student walked in.
2. My uncle is rich but he is not happy.
3. I will have breakfast before I leave home.
4. Although I helped him, he didn't thank me.
5. The boy who came this morning is my nephew.
6. I don't like the movie that we watched last night.
7. Whoever took my money is a thief.
8. I know where you live.
9. He realized that he was wrong.
10. That he loves his friend is obvious.

After showing the students the above example sentences that contain clauses, I explain that all the clauses in examples 1 and 2 are called independent clauses as they can stand on their own. Then they are told that examples 3 and 4 are different from examples 1 and 2 in that they are composed of one independent clause and one dependent clause, emphasizing the fact that the parts with the conjunctions are dependent clauses as they cannot express a complete thought on their own without the help of another part which can stand on its own; hence a dependent clause. Furthermore, I explain that the dependent clauses in the example sentences 3 and 4 function as adverbs as they modify the verbs 'will have' and 'didn't thank' respectively. Similar explanations are made regarding the remaining sentences, where the dependent clauses function as adjectives (examples 5 and 6), and as nouns (examples 7, 8, 9 and 10). With regard to the structure of these sentences, it is explicitly explained that the dependent clause and independent clause are interchangeable in a sentence involving an adverb clause (i.e. *Although I helped him, he didn't thank me* or *He didn't thank me although I helped him*), whereas an adjective clause always comes after the noun it modifies (i.e. *The*

boy who came this morning). A noun clause being a little bit more structurally complicated, more examples are often given to explain that a noun clause can function either as the subject or the object of a sentence (i.e. I don't care what time he will come back (obj) Vs What time he will come back (sub) is not my concern, and also to point out the structural differences between the two types of noun clauses (i.e. examples 7 and 8 have wh- question words to start a noun clause whereas examples 9 and 10 have 'that' at the beginning of a noun clause. Usually, at this point, I give the students an exercise that requires them to identify the parts in a specially selected paragraph (i.e. independent clause, dependent clause, adjective clause, adverb clause, noun clause, a phrase as noun, verb, adverb, adjective, etc). With this exercise, I normally end my first phase of teaching syntactic constructions.

The teaching of syntactic constructions using the student-centred approach

Like in the teaching of other aspects of language using the student-centred approach, my involvement in this activity is very limited. I divide the class into small groups (about three or four in each) and give each group the paper cuttings of a short paragraph as follows.

Yesterday evening/I got home from work/at 6 o'clock/. My wife had prepared dinner/ which we ate immediately/. After I had cleaned up the kitchen,/ we watched TV /for about an hour/. Then we got ready/ to go out /with some friends/. Our friends / arrived/ at about 9 o'clock /and we chatted/ for a while/. Later /we decided /to visit a jazz club /and listen to some music./ We really enjoyed ourselves /and stayed late/. We finally left /at one o'clock/in the morning/.

The source of the paragraph: http://esl.about.com/od/writingabcs/a/writing_narrative_paragraphs.htm

Each group then works on assembling the pieces until they think they have got the original coherent paragraph. Once they have their paragraph ready on their table, I allow the members of each group to visit the other groups so that they can make a comparison with their work. My role comes only when all the participating groups have returned to their table. Usually, I show them the original paragraph on the overhead projector, making any necessary explanations.

What I have learned from my own experiences

First and foremost, my years of teaching experience both in my country and in Thailand have told me never to stick to one approach. Earlier, I have discussed how I have employed both the teacher-centred approach and the student-centred approach in teaching the same lessons in different classes. In doing so, I have observed advantages as well as disad-

vantages. To talk about good points regarding the use of teacher-centred approach, it helps me to provide the information quickly to the students as the responsibility for providing and controlling the flow of information wholly depends on me. I also find it to be an effective way to allow students to achieve mastery when learning fundamental facts, rules, formulas, or sequences. On the down side, the chance to create a good relationship with my students becomes slim as I am most of the time being occupied with providing them with much of the information they need and there is minimal student-teacher interaction. Another thing I can predict is that, without taking a role in their own learning, students can become too dependent on their teachers and fall behind in independent thought, reasoning, critical-thinking, and problem-solving abilities. As a result, I realize that a strong investment in this style can lead to rigid, standardized, and less flexible ways of managing students and their concerns.

Like teacher-centred approach, student-centered approach has its merits and demerits, too. In teaching the above lessons using student-centred approach, I design group activities which necessitate active learning and student-to-student collaboration. However, the whole responsibility is placed on the students to take initiative to achieve results for the various tasks. For the advantages, this approach allows students to independently discover patterns and relationships in their learning by developing ideas, testing their own conclusions, and discussing their results. By working as a member in a group, they can also develop team spirit and learn whatever they can from each other. On the down side, only students who are independent, active, collaborative learners thrive in this environment as those who tend to keep aloof from others usually hesitate to participate in the activities whole-heartedly. This style of teaching can also be time-consuming and classroom management may sometimes get out of the teacher's control. When I ask my students to do group work that involves assembling the paper cuttings into a coherent paragraph, the whole class is not only noisy and chaotic, but the activity takes much longer than expected. The thing I am the least satisfied with doing this kind of activity is that I cannot expect exactly how much my students will learn the lesson in focus — a situation which I have never noticed before when I teach the same lesson using teacher-centred approach.

Conclusion

To be honest, it is hard for me to say which teaching style I prefer between the two I have discussed. However, I think it will be safe for me to say that it will benefit our students in general if we use a bit of both whenever necessary, like starting our lessons through teacher-centred approach first, followed by the student-centred approach later. One sure thing that we need to ask ourselves before starting a lesson is if our teaching goals and methods address a variety of student learning styles and, most importantly, if our teaching style assists the achievement of our course objectives.

Reference:

Land, S.M.& Hannafin, M.J. (1997). *The foundations and assumptions of technology-enhanced student-centered learning environments*. *Instructional Science* 25: 167–202.

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