THE ROLE OF LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACHES IN IMPROVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: This article examines the effect of learner-centred approaches on the English language proficiency of learners of English as a foreign language. A quasi-experimental design compared a control group taught through the traditional grammar-translation method with an experimental group taught through project-based tasks, group discussions, self-assessment, and learner-selected topics. The experimental group showed significantly greater gains in oral proficiency and higher motivation. Improvement in written skills was more limited. The findings also indicate that the effectiveness of the approach depends on teacher preparation and available instructional time.

Keywords: learner-centred education, English language, language acquisition, learner autonomy, communicative competence

Introduction

Language teaching has moved steadily away from the model in which the teacher transmits knowledge and the learner receives it passively. Learner-centred approaches place the learner's needs, interests, and degree of autonomy at the core of the instructional process. This shift is especially relevant to English as a foreign language (EFL), where communicative competence develops through meaningful use of the language rather than through memorisation of rules alone.

Weimer (2002) argues that learner-centred teaching requires changes in the balance of power in the classroom, the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility of the learner, and the purpose of assessment. Benson (2011) identifies learner autonomy as a central condition for successful language acquisition, since learners who take responsibility for their own goals tend to persist longer and engage more deeply with the target language.

Despite this theoretical support, empirical evidence on the effect of these approaches in post-Soviet EFL contexts, including Uzbekistan, remains limited. Many classrooms still rely heavily on teacher-led explanation and drilling, and the transition to learner-centred practice is often constrained by large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula, and limited teacher training. The present study therefore asks whether learner-centred instruction improves English proficiency more than traditional instruction, and whether the gains extend across oral and written skills.

Methods

The study used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a non-equivalent control group. Random assignment was not possible because intact classes were already formed by the institution. Both groups were taught by teachers with comparable qualifications and experience, and the instructional period lasted [12] weeks.

Participants

The sample consisted of [60] adult learners enrolled in an English language course at [name of institution], divided into an experimental group (n = [30]) and a control group (n = [30]). Participants were at approximately the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Group equivalence at baseline was checked through pretest scores.

Instructional Conditions

The control group followed the established curriculum, which emphasised grammar explanation, controlled exercises, and translation tasks, with teacher-led question-and-answer sessions.

The experimental group followed the same syllabus content but delivered through learner-centred procedures. These included small-group project work in which learners chose topics relevant to their own lives, structured peer discussions, learning journals, and self-assessment checklists. Grammar was addressed inductively, emerging from learners' output rather than being presented in advance.

Instruments and Data Collection

Three data sources were used. First, a standardised English proficiency test with separate listening, reading, writing, and speaking components was administered before and after the intervention. Second, oral performance was rated by two independent raters using an analytic speaking rubric covering fluency, lexical range, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation. Inter-rater reliability was checked before scoring. Third, a motivation questionnaire adapted from Dörnyei (2001) was completed by all participants at the end of the course.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all measures. Independent-samples t-tests compared posttest scores between groups, and paired-samples t-tests examined change within groups. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were reported to indicate the practical significance of differences. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Results

At baseline, the two groups did not differ significantly in overall proficiency scores. At posttest, the experimental group's mean score increased by [X] points, compared with [Y] points in the control group. This difference was statistically significant, with a large effect size (d = [value]).

The largest difference appeared in the speaking component. Raters' scores for fluency and lexical range were significantly higher in the experimental group, and learners in

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this group produced longer, more spontaneous utterances. Learners also showed more frequent self-correction during speaking tasks, which raters interpreted as evidence of growing monitoring ability.

In the writing component, the difference between groups was smaller and not statistically significant. Both groups improved in writing, but the experimental group's gains in grammatical accuracy were limited, and error rates in verb tense and article use remained high.

Questionnaire results showed that the experimental group reported significantly higher motivation, particularly regarding perceived relevance of tasks and confidence in speaking. Many participants noted that choosing their own topics made classroom communication feel more purposeful.

Discussion

The findings support the view that learner-centred instruction can strengthen the oral dimension of English proficiency. The advantage in speaking is consistent with Nunan's (1988) argument that language learning is most effective when learners engage in meaningful, goal-oriented activity. In the experimental classes, learners had repeated opportunities to negotiate meaning with peers, which likely increased both the quantity and the quality of their output.

The increase in motivation also reflects the autonomy-supporting character of the approach. When learners have a voice in topic selection and assessment, they are more likely to invest effort, a finding in line with Little's (1991) view that autonomy and engagement are closely connected.

The limited progress in writing deserves attention. Free, meaning-focused work may leave grammatical accuracy insufficiently addressed, particularly for learners at the B1 level whose written errors are systematic. This suggests that learner-centred approaches work best when combined with targeted, form-focused practice. Instruction that alternates between communicative tasks and short, explicit grammar work may offer a more balanced solution.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The quasi-experimental design, the use of intact groups, and the single-institution setting restrict the generalisability of the results. Teacher effects may also have contributed to the outcomes, since the experimental group's teacher had completed a short training course in learner-centred methods. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, randomised assignment where feasible, and longer intervention periods to examine whether gains in writing emerge over time.

Conclusion

This study suggests that learner-centred approaches improve English language proficiency, particularly in speaking, and increase learner motivation. The strongest outcomes appeared when these approaches were combined with attention to grammatical accuracy. For educational institutions, the findings point to two practical recommendations: providing teachers with training in learner-centred methods, and designing flexible lesson plans that allow learners to influence the content and pace of instruction.

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