

1 Learner-centredness: an overview of trends

1.1 Did you say 'learner-centredness'?

The desire to find means of making language teaching more responsive to learners' needs, and thus more 'learner-centred', has been a consistent feature of both writing and practical experimentation in language teaching since the 1960s. In part, this grew out of dissatisfaction with 'traditional' language teaching practice. In more positive terms, however, it reflects a widespread desire in the language teaching community to develop means of allowing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in their language study. Few teachers will have been unaware of this trend, and most will have their own opinions about learner-centredness, some positive or enthusiastic, others reserved or even sceptical. One relatively widespread reaction to learner-centredness which the author has encountered, however, is uncertainty as to what the term means, what a learner-centred approach to teaching actually involves, and how it might be realised. This uncertainty, or even confusion, is all too understandable. In consequence, this chapter will have two main goals: the first is to help readers gain an overview of the trends of thought which have led to our profession's current understanding of what a 'learner-centred' approach to teaching might mean; the second is to help them to find their way through the sometimes confusing thicket of terms and concepts they are likely to encounter in the literature.

A first point to be made in this respect is that 'learner-centredness' should not be taken as a label that is attached to a single, clearly delimited school of thought with unambiguous definitions and a clear programme of action. Our profession's interest in learner-centredness should rather be seen in terms of a broad church or community of believers who share two main sets of concerns. The first of these arises out of the belief that language teaching will be more effective if teaching structures are made more responsive to the needs, characteristics and expectations of learners, and if learners are encouraged to play an active role in the shaping of their study programme. The second involves the desire to explore the practical means by which such a qualitatively

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enhanced involvement of learners in their language study may be realised in day-to-day teaching practice.

A second point that has to be borne in mind when perusing the last three decades of research and experimentation around the general concept of learner-centredness is that one is dealing with an *emergent trend* within the language teaching profession, one that reflects differing perspectives and lines of thought, each with its own emphases and specificities. It is therefore unhelpful to look for the presence of a *deus ex machina*, calmly guiding our profession in a pre-ordained direction. Rather, one is faced with a complex and evolving social and educational system within which students, teachers and researchers have somehow felt that ‘things could be different’ and have, on this basis, explored ways of realising this ‘difference’. This explains why the terminology used is sometimes confusing, and also why the way in which terms such as ‘autonomy’ are understood has evolved over time. This is not to say that writers in applied linguistics are sloppy or careless. It is rather that the terms which are used represent in themselves an attempt to encapsulate aspects of a complex reality which we have not, as yet, fully come to grips with. This is the case in many areas of applied linguistics, but it is particularly marked with respect to learner-centredness – as we will see at a number of points in the chapters that follow.

The goal of the present chapter is to present an overview of the main trends of thought in the general area of learner-centredness and then to introduce the perspective on learner-centredness which will be developed here. 1.2 will provide an historical survey of the main trends of thought which have served to shape our current understanding of the place and role of learners in the language teaching process, while 1.3 will examine those perspectives on learner-centredness which are currently the most influential. The distinction between 1.2 and 1.3 is not clear-cut: the 1960s and 1970s are hardly ancient history, and many of the ideas looked at in 1.2 are still very much part of current language teaching practice. The distinction between formative exploration (1.2) and current understanding (1.3) is nonetheless a useful one. In 1.4 a number of terminological and conceptual distinctions central to the view of learner-centredness put forward in this book will be considered, and 1.5 will present an overview of the rest of the book and will relate the content of subsequent chapters to the perspective on learner-centredness put forward in this chapter.

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REF. In the light of the comments made above about the confusions surrounding the term ‘learner-centredness’ in the literature, it may be useful before reading further to take stock of your current attitudes to the concept of learner-centredness, even if it may seem somewhat vague or imprecise to you. If this is the case, do not worry. You are not alone!

- How would you describe your own spontaneous reaction to the concept of learner-centredness – enthusiastic, convinced, reserved, sceptical ... or whatever?
- List what *you* feel to be the main advantages of a learner-centred approach to teaching and also the main difficulties you feel could arise in the implementation of such an approach. You may do this in general terms, with a given teaching situation in mind, or on the basis of your own experience – either as a teacher or as a learner.

1.2 Formative trends

As was pointed out above, the trend towards a more learner-responsive, or learner-centred approach to language teaching should not be seen as the product of a single, coherently structured school of thought but rather as the confluence of a number of sometimes overlapping, sometimes differing perspectives on language teaching. These perspectives need therefore to be examined firstly in their historical context, and then in terms of their contribution to our current understanding of what learner-centred teaching can mean.

1.2.1 *Humanistic language teaching*

The humanistic movement in language teaching represents an eclectic grouping of ideas developed, in the first instance, in the fields of general education and psychology. Influential authors in the development of the ideational basis of humanistic education in general include Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1961). Underhill identifies seven main themes in humanistic psychology:

- 1 High-level health and well-being
- 2 The whole person
- 3 The human motivation towards self-realisation
- 4 Change and development
- 5 Education as a life-long process
- 6 Respect for an individual’s subjective experience
- 7 Self-empowerment (1989: 25)

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Stevick, in a well-balanced and insightful evaluation of the humanistic movement in language teaching, recognises five main strands or ‘overlapping components’ in humanistic thinking, which he labels H1–H5. These are:

- (H1) *Feelings*, including both personal emotions and esthetic appreciation. This aspect of humanism tends to reject whatever makes people feel bad, or whatever destroys or forbids esthetic enjoyment.
- (H2) *Social relations*. This side of humanism encourages friendship and cooperation, and opposes whatever tends to reduce them.
- (H3) *Responsibility*. This aspect accepts the need for public scrutiny, criticism and correction, and disapproves of whoever or whatever denies their importance.
- (H4) *Intellect*, including knowledge, reason, and understanding. This aspect fights against whatever interferes with the free exercise of the mind, and is suspicious of anything that cannot be tested intellectually.
- (H5) *Self-actualisation*, the quest for full realisation of one’s own deepest true qualities. This aspect believes that since conformity leads to enslavement, the pursuit of uniqueness brings about liberation. (1990: 23–24)

The ways in which these psychological and educational principles can be implemented in second language (L2) teaching have been explored by authors such as Moskowitz (1978) and Stevick (1976, 1980). However, it is probably methods such as Asher’s Total Physical Response, Curran’s Community Language Learning, Gattegno’s Silent Way, and Lozanov’s Suggestopedia, that have most forcibly struck popular imagination as embodying the ‘humanistic approach’ to language teaching. A brief look at two of these methods may help to bring out the ways in which the basic principles of humanism can be realised at classroom level, and also the differing emphases within the movement (readers are referred to the relevant chapters of Richards and Rodgers [1986] and Stevick [1990] for fuller accounts).

Caleb Gattegno’s Silent Way (1972, 1976) is best known for its use of coloured *cuisinière* rods and the orchestrative but non-interventive role of the teacher. The external form of a Silent Way class may seem rather strange to an outsider: the teacher orchestrates learners’ oral production via a carefully planned use of coloured rods and pronunciation or vocabulary charts, but keeps her own spoken intervention to a minimum and avoids explicit judgment or correction of learners’ production. The Silent Way’s rather unconventional teaching procedures are, however, designed with the explicit goal of generating a problem-solving approach to learning: by limiting her intervention, the teacher

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places the responsibility for generating language and identifying meaningful patterns on the learners themselves, a process which Gattegno describes as ‘subordinating teaching to learning’. In this way, learners are meant to develop independence, autonomy and a sense of personal responsibility for their learning. Stevick sets out this goal in the following terms:

. . . our proposals have been designed to free students deliberately from dependence and aim at autonomous and responsible learners. By using what each student brings to the task and by being acquainted with how one learns what is implicit in skills and capacities, we can help others become free of inhibitions, of anxiety, of all the hampering moves and at the same time make them experience an expansion of their self in the new universe open to them. (1990: 12, citing Gattegno 1988)

Although expressed in terms typical of humanistic psychology, what Gattegno is describing here are the processes of ‘learning to learn’ and of learner empowerment, concepts which will recur throughout this book. Not surprisingly, therefore, Stevick sees Gattegno as adhering in particular to the fourth and fifth humanistic tenets listed above, viz. human intellectual development and the shaping of the unique self.

Charles Curran, the originator of Community Language Learning (CLL) (1972, 1976), was a Catholic priest who taught psychology and counselling, and CLL bears the mark of both of these aspects of Curran’s experience. Curran conceptualises the language learning process in strongly theological terms (cf. his use of the terms ‘incarnation’ and ‘redemption’) and his approach to teaching is heavily influenced by the methods of counselling therapy. In a CLL class, learners typically sit in a circle and talk naturally about a subject of personal relevance. The learners formulate what they wish to say either in their first language (L1) or in the L2. The teacher stands beside the learner who is speaking and either gives the L2 form of what the learner has said in his L1, or gently reformulates his L2 utterance in an appropriate manner: each learner then repeats his contribution to the conversation, and so it moves on. The resultant conversation is recorded and replayed at the end of the class, various tasks being performed on the language it contains in order to aid retention. CLL thus has no pre-set syllabus, the language content being derived directly from the interests and concerns of the learners themselves. In CLL, the teacher (or, to use Curran’s term, the counsellor) plays two main roles: the first is that of resource person who helps learners to formulate in the L2 the messages they wish to convey; the second is to create a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere and to foster open and trusting relations among class members.

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Stevick (1990: 98) finds that CLL embodies four of his five humanistic principles. Most conspicuous, he feels, is a concern for personal feelings and for the establishment of social relations (principles 1 and 2), though he also identifies a concern with responsibility and with self-actualisation (principles 3 and 5). Two aspects of CLL which will recur in subsequent chapters are the priority given to the generation of learning content by the learners themselves, in terms of both the topic and the precise form of expression desired, and the role of the teacher as learning counsellor.

The humanistic movement in language teaching has contributed to the development of our profession's understanding of learner-centredness in two main ways. The first is by allocating a central place in language teaching to the subjective and personal concerns of learners, and thereby moving away from a view of language teaching in which centre stage is held by the language code rather than the messages learners wish to convey. This has led to the incorporation into mainstream language teaching of a variety of affectively-oriented or personal-expression based activities whose origins lie in the humanistic movement. The second contribution of humanistic language teaching is its concern with the learning process itself, in particular with respect to learners' affective involvement in their language study.

This having been said, the degree to which humanistic ideas have been taken on board by the language teaching community as a whole has been limited by certain factors (cf. Atkinson, 1989, for one writer's reservations about humanistic language teaching). One is the heavy emphasis placed on affective input by some humanistic writers. True, every individual's affective concerns are very important to that individual, but this does not mean that these concerns need necessarily constitute the central focus of the person's language learning experience. Humanistic language teaching thus tends to pay insufficient attention to the situationally-constrained or real-world language needs of learners, needs which may be of considerable importance to the life goals of the learners concerned. Much the same applies to the closeness of the relationship that some humanistic writers wish to see established within the learning group. It *may* be desirable for learners to establish close or caring relationships with their fellow students or with their teacher, but this should never be imposed, nor should it be pursued as a goal in itself without due consideration of the cultural background and expectations of those concerned (both students and teachers). A second cause of the unease some teachers experience with humanistic methods is the feeling that the methods have been developed with insufficient regard to the practical constraints under which much language teaching takes place. Stevick acknowledges this problem and explains it in the following terms:

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Many of the devisers of unconventional methods have been people from outside the language teaching profession ... Their positions as outsiders have allowed them to come up with 'brilliant insights' ... that had never before been systematically exploited within the language teaching profession, and for this we must be grateful to them. But as outsiders they also designed methods that do not take into account the full range of social and curricular realities within which most language teaching is done. (1990: 142)

To sum up, the humanistic movement has made a considerable contribution to the language teaching community's understanding of what learner-centred teaching can entail, and it has expanded the range of insights and pedagogical resources available to teachers. At the same time, a genuinely learner-centred approach to teaching is more complex, and raises a far wider range of questions, than many humanistic writers have been willing to acknowledge, a point made by Brumfit (1982). The essential problem is that most humanistic writers seem to be involved in the search for 'the' way of teaching language. In itself, this is of course a laudable endeavour. Language learners, however, differ on a number of counts, which include the purposes for which the language is being learned, their subjective needs arising out of a variety of psychological and cognitive factors, as well as the expectations generated by the social norms and traditions of learning proper to the learners' home culture. These sources of variance, which will be considered in Chapters 3–5, are accorded insufficient attention by humanistic writers, and this seriously limits the transferability of these writers' frequently exciting insights into different language learning contexts. In terms of learner-centredness, then, most humanistic methods fail to take sufficient account of learner variability and of the ways in which this influences the processes of teaching and learning.

1.2.2 Communicative Language Teaching

The trend which has come to be known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) originated in the mid-1960s as a result of two related concerns. One was discontent with the essentially code-based view of language teaching found in the approaches most widely practised at that time (audio-lingualism and the grammar-translation method); the other was the desire to develop course design structures which were more flexible and more responsive to students' real world communicative needs.

An important role was played in the early development of CLT by the

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Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project (MLP), which was set up in 1963. The MLP was an ambitious and wide-ranging initiative designed to promote language teaching and learning in Europe, both at school and in the context of adult permanent education. It aimed at promoting a 'learner-centred, motivation-based' approach to teaching which, according to Trim, was:

... anti-authoritarian [and which encouraged] individual initiative and responsibility in the exercise of choice of objectives and methods, and self-assessment in the monitoring of progress and performance. (1980: 47)

Inevitably, this called for a re-thinking of the terms in which the goals of language teaching were formulated. In this respect, Trim says that the MLP rejected:

... a systematic taxonomic division of language as subject matter in favour of an analysis of learning situations [since it] makes little sense to subscribe to a 'learner-centred, motivation-based' approach unless the needs of learners find direct expression in the context of courses and associated tests and examinations (Op. cit.: 53)

The resulting approach to the identification of learning goals (cf. Richterich 1973) involved an analysis of learners' target uses of the language in terms of language *situations* (defined by *agents*, the persons involved, together with the categories of *time* and *place*) and *operations* (*functions* to be fulfilled by the relevant communicative act, the *objects* to which it relates, and the *means* by which it is produced). In other words, the approach to goal-setting developed within the MLP was based on an analysis of the functional and communicative demands of the situations in which learners would be required to use the language.

The MLP was not, of course, the only attempt in the late 60s and early 70s to make language teaching more responsive to learners' functional language needs. The expansion of language teaching worldwide and, in particular, the growing need for specific purpose language teaching (LSP) which arose out of the economic expansion experienced by many newly independent countries during this period, starkly demonstrated the inadequacies of the traditional code-based approach to teaching. The pressing need for a variety of language skills within a rapidly evolving social and economic context made it essential for the language teaching profession to develop appropriate tools for identifying learners' communicative needs and for translating them into coherent course structures. This needs analysis-based approach to course design found its most

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coherent expression in Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978), which will be discussed further in 3.1 and 3.2.

In parallel with this pragmatically-driven attempt to make course design procedures more responsive to learners' real-world communicative requirements, the same period witnessed a reformulation of the theoretical framework within which language, and hence language teaching, should be viewed. Hymes' (1972) concept of 'communicative competence', for example, included considerations of communicative effectiveness and awareness of the TL (target language) culture, and thus represented a more integrated view of the goals of language instruction than that implicit in the narrowly linguistic view of language competence defended by Chomsky during the same period. Halliday (1970: 145) developed a functional view of language based on the description of speech acts or texts since, for him, 'only through the study of *language in use* are all the functions of language, and therefore all components of meaning, brought into focus' (emphasis added). In the field of applied linguistics, Widdowson (cf. his significantly entitled *Teaching Language as Communication*, 1978) advocated an approach to language teaching based on the analysis of the communicative acts involved in both spoken interaction and the production of written texts.

These trends shifted the focus of language teaching away from the linguistic code viewed in a restrictive sense to language as a system for expressing messages and achieving functional and communicative goals in real-world interactive situations. Richards and Rodgers sum up the main characteristics of 'this communicative view of language' as follows:

- 1 Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- 2 The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
- 3 The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- 4 The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse. (1986: 71)

This change in emphasis regarding the content focus of language teaching went hand-in-hand with a re-thinking of the process side of language study. The communicative movement sought to develop a mode of teaching and learning which was experientially-based, involving the use of communicative tasks whose content mirrored the learners' target uses of the language. This led to a concern with 'authenticity' in terms of the language and materials introduced into the classroom, as well as the tasks that learners were asked to perform.

The communicative movement effected a profound change in the way

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in which language teaching was conceived, and gave rise to what remains the dominant paradigm in language teaching. Its contribution to the development of learner-centredness may be seen on two main levels. Firstly, and most importantly, the communicative movement accorded a central place in course design to the communicative goals of the learners concerned, i.e. to the messages they needed to receive or convey in real-world interactive situations. Secondly, on the methodological level, CLT fostered an experiential form of language study in which learners' real-world experience and concerns were given a central role in learning activities. This having been said, mainstream CLT has suffered from a number of weaknesses (cf. Hutchinson and Waters 1984). These relate to a somewhat mechanical approach to needs analysis and inadequate attention to the process side of learning, points which will be looked at in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Nonetheless, it is difficult to over-estimate the contribution of CLT to our current understanding of the place of the learner's communicative needs and goals within the language learning process.

1.2.3 Learning strategy research

Research conducted from the early 1970s (cf. Rubin 1987 for an overview) into the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of L2 learners served to introduce the concept of 'learning strategy' firmly into the terminology of L2 teaching. Learning strategies, in general terms, are purposeful activities undertaken by learners with the goal of promoting their knowledge of and ability to use the TL. These activities may relate to very detailed aspects of learning, such as the organisation of vocabulary lists, or may be much broader in focus, such as deciding whether to follow a language course or to seek out social contacts with TL speakers. The learning strategy research of the 70s will be discussed further in 2.2 within the framework of learner training, and two categorisations of learning strategies will be discussed in 7.2 with respect to the active involvement of learners in their language study.

The learning strategy research conducted in the 1970s (e.g. Rubin 1975; Naiman *et al.* 1978) studied the attitudes and behaviours which characterised more and less successful language learners. The methodology used was explorative, employing questionnaires and interviews, so as to allow the researchers to gain insight into learners' subjective perceptions of language learning. One motivation behind these studies was to identify the behavioural and attitudinal characteristics of 'good' (or successful) language learners, with the idea that such a profile might provide an agenda for strategy training with less successful learners. One such list of 'good learner' strategies will be given in 2.2. With hindsight,