Critical Analysis Of Student-Centered Teaching Research Method; Using Selected
Nigerian Universities As A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper presents an evaluation of an effort to broaden the acquisition
of knowledge of final year undergraduate students in language courses
in selected Nigerian universities using the student-centered method.
The essence of using this method is to ascertain its effectiveness vis-a-
vis other teaching research methods. This is done in conjunction with
other specific techniques such as case study teaching, group work,
problem-based learning and simulation. It was observed that the
curriculum fashioned toward student-centeredness produced positive
results on students' evaluation. It was also observed that the use of
student-centered method encouraged a strong social context for
learning. This method, however, observed that students continued to
lay emphasis on more formal teaching methods, and that the
effectiveness of the method under this circumstance largely depended
on the way it was combined with other teaching techniques.

Key words: Student-centered, Teaching Research Method, Teaching techniques,
Subject evaluation and Evaluation.

Introduction

The study is aimed at ascertaining the effectiveness of small group teaching for language
students, using the student-centered approach. To further enhance effectiveness of the
method, other ranges of interactive learning activities were introduced into the exi siting
curriculum of the students of this level. Final year students of Russian language of the
Universities of Lagos, Ibadan and Nsukka were used in this research. The choice of the
language and the institutions is based on the fact that it is only these universities that offer
Russian Language as a course at the degree level and the number of students offering the
course in the universities are relatively few. This is vital and imperative in determining
the aims and objective of this research.

The choice of final year students in the study is apparent because of their supposed
experience at that level; an essential ingredient to the study. It is also important to
emphasize that the students are from different social backgrounds and academic
environments, which distinguishes each of them as unique.

History of Russian Language Study in Nigeria

The study of Russian language study began in 1965 in the University of Ibadan, then
University College, Ibadan when the first graduate of Russian language, Segun Odunuga

came back from the Soviet Union to take appointment as a lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages.

The study of the language began at an auxiliary level until, with the employment of more lecturers, it became a full-fledged degree course in 1980.

In the University of Lagos, the study of the language also began as a minor discipline in1970/1971, but later, Russian studies became a full-fledged degree programme in 1983. The first set of graduates were three in number and they completed their degree programme at the end of the 1986/87 session. Students of Russian have since 1984, been undergoing the Russian Immersion Programme at the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language, Moscow and later at State Technical University, Volgograd but now at Ivanovo State University, Ivanovo, Russia

The relationship between student – centered approaches using interactive learning activities in small group teaching and the constructivist theory.

Student-centered approach to teaching emanated from the belief and acceptability of efficiency of the theory known as constructivism. Constructivism is a psychological theory of knowledge (epistomogly) which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences. In the broadest terms, constructivist learning is based on an understanding that learners construct knowledge for themselves (Hein, 1991; Krause et al, 2003). The constructivist theories can be broadly divided into two; cognitive and social constructivism. Cognitive constructivism is based on Piagets model, which emphasizes the interaction between the individual and their environment in constructing meaningful knowledge, whereas social constructivism attributed to the work of Vygotsky – emphasizes the importance of student learning through interaction with the teacher and other students. (Jadallah, 2000; Maypole Davies, 2001). Based on this distinction, this study has more adherence to social constructivism which emphasizes building the social context for learning and facilitating student learning through small group activity and encouragement of high levels of peer to peer, and learner to teacher interaction (Barraket, 2003).

The principal implication of constructive understanding for the way in which knowledge is produced is that students are the key initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge –acquisition, rather than passive vessels who receive the transmission of knowledge from expert teachers. Student-centered learning (and teaching) has itself been variously defined as a process by which students are given greater autonomy and control over the choice of subject matter, the pace of learning, and the learning methods used (Gibbs, 1992). Social constructivist scholars view learning as an active process where learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves, hence the importance of encouraging guesswork and intuitive thinking in learners. Under the student-centered learning, emphasis is shifted away from the teacher to the learner and the content and indeed, to a facilitator who needs to display a totally different set of skills than a teacher. A teacher tells, a facilitator asks; a teacher lectures from the front, a facilitator supports from the back; a teacher gives answers according to a set curriculum, a facilitator provides guidelines and creates the environment for the lecturer to arrive at his or her own conclusions; a teacher mostly gives a monologue, a facilitator is in continuous dialogue with the learners.

A further characteristic of the role of the facilitator in the social constructivist viewpoint is that the instructor and the learners are equally involved in learning from each other as

well (Holt and Willard–Holt 2000). This by extension means that the learning experience is both subjective and objective and requires that the instructor's culture, values and background become an essential part of the interplay between learners and tasks in the shaping of meaning.

In analyzing student-centered teaching method further, it is important to make reference to the thinking of Weimer (2002), who argues that student-centered teaching is an exercise in changing teaching practice. He identifies five changes to practice in student-centered teaching which are;

- shifting the balance of classroom power from teacher to student;
- designing content as a means to building knowledge rather than a 'knowledge end' in itself;
- positioning the teacher as facilitator and contributor, rather than director and source of knowledge;
- shifting responsibility for learning form teacher to learner; and
- promoting learning through effective assessment.

From this analysis, it is observed that shifting towards student-centered learning encompasses changes to the learning environment (social and physical), changes to the nature and communication of learning content, and changes to the assessment of learning (Barraket, 2003).

The Case Study

The central objective of the study is to ascertain the extent to which the use of student-centered techniques improve social context for learning, with emphasis on students learning a second language. The students include full-time and evening students in the final stages of a four-year degree programme. The programme enables the evening students to work during the day and attend lectures in the evening and because the programme has the same course content for both the full-time and the evening students, it is possible to have them under the same classroom setting. This research was carried out among students of Russian Language from the Universities of Lagos, Ibadan and Benin. The students have different social and educational backgrounds. In all, 35 students were used in the research with 20 from the University of Lagos, while 10 and 5 are from the Universities of Ibadan and Benin respectively. This was based on average of students' enrolment in the course in the year under review in the different universities.

Methodology

The methodology used in this work is action research methodology. The action research methodology may be described as an interactive process of change or intervention, data collection band analysis, and reflection leading to action outcomes (Barraket, 2003). According to Kurt Lewin and Paolo Friere, action research in the context of education has been defined as a form of systematic inquiry that produces direct impacts on an educator's practice and empowers them to reinvigorate their classroom environments and promote improvements to instruction methods (Glanz, 1991). Data used in evaluation of the study were collected through students' assessment and classroom observation, and was compared with a similar research not based on student-centered approach. Students were equally given an opportunity to evaluate their performances using questionnaires, which they responded to objectively.

Assessment of Student-Centered Approach on Students' Learning

The outcome of student-centered approach on teaching Russian language was positively high in contrast to the previous study using the same students but other teaching methods. Students' responses on the questionnaire were explicit on this and their attitude and enthusiasm on this new method was a pointer to this fact.

In the previous study, the students rated the quality of teaching the language as 60% while in this, the quality of teaching was rated 68%. On quality of learning, 30 students agreed that the quality of learning improved in contrast to 26 students who were indifferent on the success of the two methods. In response to student's enthusiasm and preference of the two methods, 31 students were favourably disposed to student-centered method while 25 opted for the other teaching methods. 32 students were of the opinion that the level of assimilation was very high while 18 students agreed otherwise. Again, 32 students agreed that group work helped them to understand and think critically, 10 agreed otherwise, while students were emphatic that they enjoyed getting to know each other and felt confident in expressing themselves better than under close watch of a teacher. They however, agreed that the use of primary source materials helped to make the subject interesting.

In summing up the findings, there are clear indications that the student-centered learning methods in the classroom has positive effect on students' performance, satisfaction and learning experience.

Possible Shortcomings of Student – Centered learning Method

From the above analysis, it is evident that utilizing teaching approaches that allow students' active engagement with the subject matter proved effective in terms of students' performance and satisfaction. It is observed also that the application of teaching method towards a student-centered approach was very positive. All the same, there are some issues in this method that require further reflection. It is difficult to accurately authenticate the extent of effectiveness of the student-centered learning method since the assessment is done basically by the students themselves. Again, many students agree that they learn a lot when they are left alone to themselves but find it difficult to present what they have learnt outside the classroom context, or before an instructor. The interpretation of this is that the students are oftentimes deceived by their imaginations when in an actual fact, they don't know much they claim to know. Holt and Willard-Holt (2000) emphasize the concept of dynamic assessment, which is a way of assessing the true potential of learners that differs significantly from conventional tests. Rather than viewing assessment as a process carried out by one person, such as an instructor, it is seen as a two-way process involving interaction between both instructor and learner. Thus, assessment and learning are seen as inextricably linked and not separate processes.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the study, it is evident that the use of student-centered method through the use of interactive small group activities proved positive in the enhancement of students' learning; using Russian language as a case study. Of great significance was the high level of dialogue and interaction that existed among the students during the study and the feedback from them was tremendous and positive. Notwithstanding the shortfalls of doing without an instructor, students were able to adequately share knowledge and ideas amongst themselves. Many of them attest to the fact that more vocabulary was learnt and the formation of simple sentences was enhanced based on what they had learnt. They freely practiced and built upon their previous knowledge. It is therefore, evident

that the context of teaching language to diverse groups of students using student-centered and more traditional approaches to teaching is positive and successful.

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