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REVISITING THE ENGLISH TEACHER'S CLASSROOM LANGUAGE IN TERMS OF THE LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

One of the most challenging tasks confronting present-day teachers is moving from 'instructor-centred teaching' to 'learner-centred teaching'. The former focuses on what the teacher does in the classroom and is based upon the belief that one teaching style fits all students, while the latter places the student at the centre of the learning process and enables the teacher to respond to increasingly diverse student needs as well as individual learning styles [2, p. 49; 4]. The necessity to make the above-mentioned move is recognized by contemporary scholars who believe that the teacher-centred approach does not address the needs of all students and therefore is not working in twenty-first century diverse classrooms. Students should be empowered to control the learning process and encouraged to discover and state their learning preferences [1; 2, p. 49; 3; 4].

Educators have specified concrete areas of the teaching-learning process that need to change for the learner-centred approach to be successfully implemented: the Function of Content, the Role of the Instructor, the Responsibility for Learning, the Processes and Purposes of Assessment, and the Balance of Power [1]. This paper focuses on the role of the instructor, particularly the instructor's language, in adopting the learner-centred approach in the English classroom and enhancing the effectiveness of learning English as a foreign language. While hardly anyone could disagree with the statement that positive language strengthens motivation, helps build rapport with students, and constitutes constructive feedback, whereas negative language discourages students from showing initiative and is destructive to the learning process, teachers repeatedly use comments with a negative connotation, though they may not always be aware of the fact. Another common tendency worth mentioning is the use of 'empty' phrases that may be well-intentioned but fail to

perform the intended function. Thus the **aim** of this paper is to raise English teachers' awareness of their classroom language by identifying expressions that may seem innocuous and helpful but could prove disparaging or just ineffective and to suggest more learner-friendly alternatives.

As a result of interviewing both teachers and students, there have been selected a number of words and phrases that need reconsidering in view of the ideas of the learner-centred approach:

- *You must ...* – As the modal verb *must* is used to indicate that it is the speaker who decides that something is necessary, it would seem advisable for teachers to avoid it in instructions so as not to sound as if they are imposing their will on students. To show that the teacher puts learners' needs first, teacher trainers suggest using the verb *need* (*You need to ...*).
- *Don't be shy.* – This phrase may sound somewhat patronizing as the teacher seems to presume that a student is a shy person, a characterization some students may object to. '*Don't hold back*' could be an alternative as it implies unwillingness or caution without referring to a person's character traits.
- *You won't understand it. // What do you need it (this information/book/ ...) for? Use the book(s) I recommended to you.* – Such a discouraging response to a student's question is likely to kill their desire to explore the language on their own and is openly teacher-centred. In the learner-centred classroom the teacher should never curb a student's desire to go beyond the material being practised at the moment but instead should provide advice and encouragement. – *It might be a bit too soon to discuss it but if you are really interested, you could read (book title) / we could address this question right now or next time. // You might find (book title) easier to understand at this stage / more informative / ...*
- *Not good enough.* – It is an example of unconstructive feedback which is not very helpful to the learner, as it is not specific enough, it does not indicate the exact areas that need to be improved. The teacher's feedback will be more effective if it starts with some encouragement and proceeds to specify the

problem areas, e.g. *A good try, but you need more practice in asking questions. Pay special attention to the word order. // Some interesting thoughts, but remember to start a paragraph when you introduce a new idea.*

- *Do you understand what you are to do?* – The positive answer to this question does not necessarily mean that the students know precisely what they are supposed to do. So the answer may be just as meaningless as the question. Such an ‘empty’ answer could be avoided by asking a more specific question, e.g. *What’s the first thing we do?*, or by running through the instructions one more time, enlisting the students’ help.
- *Is that clear? / Are there any questions?* – These questions are similar to the above-mentioned ‘*Do you understand?*’ as they do not guarantee a truthful answer. To prevent students from giving a perfunctory reply and to overcome their reluctance to exercise the right to ask questions, the teacher could specify their inquiry, e.g. *Is that 100% clear?* Not many students will profess to fully understand a new topic so they will have no choice but admit to having some unanswered questions or requiring clarifications.

As we can see, the above-given phrases may not just fail to serve the intended purpose but might also produce an undesirable effect, which goes to show that teachers should be careful with what they say if they want to make their classroom a learner-centred one. On the other hand, what matters is not only what we say but also how we deliver our comments. The intonation may play the decisive role and soften the potential adverse effect of an ill-chosen expression. Moreover, we should take into consideration the nature of a particular group. Due to the differences in their personalities and attitude to the learning process, students tend to respond differently to the teacher’s language. For instance, when hearing the phrase ‘Any questions?’, a determined and highly-motivated student will eagerly jump at the chance to ask their questions. What’s more, they may not even wait for the teacher’s invitation to make their inquiries. Therefore, the effect brought about by the teacher’s language depends on a combination of factors. Nevertheless, the more careful the teacher is in their choice of words, the better chances they have of building up a good rapport with

students and effectively catering to their diverse needs, which is an essential prerequisite for the conversion to learner-centred teaching.

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