

## **What can be learned from student-centeredness in curriculum and assessment? Implications for teachers**

Yildiz Turgut, Ph.D.  
Mersin University, Turkey

### **Abstract**

Research on language teaching has focused intensely on how learners can become more active and responsible for their own and peers' learning. This qualitative study with social constructionist theoretical framework investigates how learners express their voice both in a curriculum and an assessment process of a listening and pronunciation course within a large class size. Also, how the learners' perspectives towards the course has changed is explained emphasizing the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centeredness via learners' teaching and assessing their peers, consequently, constructing a teacher schema they would like to be in the future.

### **Introduction**

Applying learner-centered teaching methodologies and curricula might be difficult in language teaching departments in Turkey, especially at Mersin University. Limitations could be various. For example, at Mersin University, while I was teaching a listening and pronunciation course (IDE 105), large class-sizes (in total 82 students, 41 in each section), time constraints (a total of 42 hours, 14 weeks and 3 hours a week), and content of the course were some of the problems I encountered. The listening and pronunciation course was to be offered to freshmen in their first semester. However, a week before the semester began, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) restructured the courses in the undergraduate program with general descriptions. As the student population would be freshmen and as many of them passed the preparatory class exam, they had very limited experience about taking a course at the undergraduate level. Additionally, when I met with the students, I realized that the students had a negative attitude towards listening and pronunciation due to their previous experiences, which included listening to cassettes and doing the fill in the blanks exercises. Also, the students had very limited experience of working in pairs and groups as well as using computers and the internet. Many of them had rarely typed anything on the computer. Few of them had computers often used for either watching movies, listening to music or chatting with friends on Messenger.

Considering these problems and similar to Assinder's (1991) and Spatt and Leung's (2000) studies in which students prepared their own classroom materials and then taught them to each other, the IDE 105 course was designed as a student-centered course from its application to its assessment processes that could enhance these freshmen students' pair work, technology and pronunciation skills. The course became a part of this present qualitative study with a social constructionist theoretical framework investigating learners' participation in the curriculum development and the assessment processes. The research question was how learners make their voices heard in the curriculum and assessment of the listening and pronunciation course.

### **Social Constructionism and Peer Learning**

Social constructionist theoretical framework states that knowledge occurs through social interactions; in other words, it refers to "the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (Crotty, 1998). While working with a peer, students who belong to the same language proficiency level can scaffold each other within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2001). In that sense, they can be both novice and expert and they can teach and learn together.

A learner-centered approach in language instruction is founded on the concept that the learner is central in the learning process. Learners learn primarily because of what they bring to their classroom experience in terms of their perceived needs, motivations, past experiences, background knowledge, interests, and creative skills. Learners are active as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge. They may assume a decision-making role in the classroom, often deciding what is to be learned, through which activities, and at what pace. Learners can also produce materials and provide realia for the classroom. Teachers, on the other hand, are seen as facilitators, helpers, and resources (Campbell & Kryszewska, 1992), with a decentralized role.

Although the notion of learner-centeredness has been applied successfully to teaching practice (Campbell & Kryszewska, 1992; Deller, 1989), methodology (Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1997), curriculum development (Nunan, 1988), and learner training (Wenden, 1986; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990), little mention has been made of the possibility of applying learner-centered techniques in assessment. This is especially true in the area of listening and pronunciation

assessment, where the testing process itself may not reflect learner needs (Rost, 1990) but where assessment serves as a key source of motivation for many learners.

Keeping these issues in mind, during the fall semester of 2007, based on the CHE's general descriptions and the technology and ELT infusion, I picked up the topics (audiomaterials, movies, internet news clips, conference presentations, online books audio and visual, commercials, podcasting) and decided on the number of pairs who would present each week according to the total number of students. 82 freshmen of the ELT department at Mersin University aged between 18-23 assigned themselves to the topics and chose their pair. They also shaped the content making their voices heard in the curriculum.

### **Data collection and analysis methods**

While investigating learners' participation to the curriculum development and the assessment processes through a qualitative research with social constructionist theoretical framework, the following research questions will guide this present study:

1. How do learners express their voice both in a curriculum and an assessment process of a listening and pronunciation course (IDE 105) within a large class size?
2. How do the learners' perspectives towards the course change when the structure of the course has shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered one via learners' teaching and assessing their peers?

The data collection methods were, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, archival data collection and a feedback session. Participant observations (Jorgensen, 1989) included 108 mini lessons lasting 15 minutes each. For the mini lesson presentations, pairs found materials on a topic, designed an activity (e.g. sentence intonation), prepared lesson plans and did the activity being a model for their peers and correcting their peers' pronunciation and intonation mistakes. Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) were conducted for 14 weeks lasting 10-20 minutes each. During the interviews, participants were asked to report the points they have learned and to be improved. Archival data (Hill, 2003) included lesson plans, activity handouts, peer feedback forms, self-evaluation reports, the researcher's field notes, an anonymous survey to triangulate

the data they have written on the self-evaluation reports and findings from other data sources. At the end of the semester, during the 30-minute-feedback session, we revised the activities, the points to be considered and improved as learners and as an instructor.

The data analysis method was discourse analysis (Gee, 2005). After the data were transcribed, the data extracts and meaning units were identified. Then themes (motifs) were created and the analysis was organized to address the research questions of the present study.

## **Findings**

The general frame is ‘this course is different’, which includes two stories: ‘learning with a peer’ and ‘acting like a teacher’. The first story, learning listening and pronunciation with a peer, includes a sub-story: scaffolding each other explained in two sub stories: sharing tasks and creativity. The second story, acting like a teacher, includes three sub-stories: evaluation, having control over an activity and being motivated to learn pronunciation. The last sub-story about motivation is developed further through two sub stories: listening and pronunciation as an out of class activity and changing attitude towards listening and pronunciation.

### **Story 1: Learning with a peer**

Participants stated that working with a peer enabled them to cooperate with each other while preparing the activities in a more creative way besides learning to share tasks. Also, the classmates’ feedback provided scaffolding to the presenters making them notice their pronunciation mistakes. The interaction also enabled participants to teach topics to their friends indicating that they can both learn and enjoy tasks with their friends. For example, Ayhan stated, “we co-operated with a partner on a wide range of topics. Initially, I grasped the chance of high interaction with them, thus communicating in a formal way, perhaps for the first time. It taught me that I can be really serious, grave upon co-working on a particular subject even if they were my best friends. This could be regarded as the basic step of academic life’s ladder. I achieved great to overcome adolescent habits by co-working seriously with my clown friends”. Through building a world (Gee, 2005) Ayhan considered collaboration (peer work activity) with his friends as a connection between friendship and academic life.

The peer scaffolding happened while preparing an activity. Presenters “took some more responsibilities towards each other. For example, while one of us collected the information, the other one did the works related with computer” (Doga). For students, who used to work individually, it might be difficult for them to share the tasks equally and respect each other’s opinion. For instance, one of the participants said: “as we made our presentations in pairs, I learned how to share a duty as equal. Before, this class, I used to think I should be the dominant one. But, when we share the duties or conversations, I did them equally. Namely, I learned sharing” (Tulin). Additionally, Neval stated: “working with a partner provides us to think widely and in a creative way. I realized that the presentations of two students are much more effective than one student’s presentation. Since I believe that my performance with my partner was better than the performance I present without a partner. When I look at whole term, I see that students listen to pairs in an active way. To sum up, working with a pair is useful thing while preparing some activities, because as I said we think much more creatively”. Through sharing, students kept supporting each other in terms of tasks such as using computers to prepare the materials, also they were creating something interesting and having fun to learn.

In addition to the preparation process, the participants scaffolded each other during the learning process, too. For instance, Ali stated, “ a student can not notice his/her faults while speaking or making presentation. I also cannot. My friends filled feedback papers about my performance in my presentation. So, I could see my faults and try not to repeat them in the following presentations”. Here Ali really gave importance to his class-mates’ feedback and his own contribution, as an audience, to other presenters’ learning.

Also, from the perspective of a person who giving feedback, the process of giving feedback contributed to the learning process. To fill the feedback forms accurately, one had to listen to the presenters very carefully. Filling the forms, according to Fadime, also improved her skills of evaluating presenters. As a teacher, gaining skills in the evaluation process can also prepare them for the teaching profession. Moreover, the feedback process was considered as a “very democratic system” (Kadriye) as it might be difficult for a teacher to observe every moment of the presentations. In that sense, participants’ evaluation and feedback can enhance the evaluation process bringing in the points that the instructor might miss.

## **Story 2: Acting like a teacher**

The participants were acting like a teacher during the mini lessons. Towards the end of the semester they developed a teacher profile they would like to be. For example, Dursun visualized himself as a guide and facilitator providing sources to students. Also, Melek explained the characteristics of a teacher she wanted to be; caring about students' thoughts and making corrections if it was necessary. According to her, a teacher was a role model for students; and thus responsible for showing the proper pronunciation. Both Dursun's and Melek's statements indicated that materials used during the course were not only used as sources to improve the participants' listening and pronunciation skills, but also as sources that could be used in the future. They became aware of the importance of learning and practising the correct pronunciation in terms of their profession.

This awareness might be achieved through three aspects of acting like a teacher. Firstly, participants learned to evaluate each other as a teacher during the presentations and the evaluations were added to the presentation grades. In that sense, they took the responsibility of evaluating each other. The participants reported that they learned several things during this process, such as 'being unbiased' towards their close friends (Melek).

Secondly, as a teacher during the presentations, the presenters controlled the class, which enabled them to experience being a teacher through mini-lessons as well as preparations (e.g., material selection). For example, Emre prepared the activities "by listening the whole podcasting with my partner. So we learnt how to prepare activities for students. During the presentations which are about intonation, we corrected all the intonation mistakes our friends made. So it is clear that presenters must study harder than the others." During the preparation process, presenters also learned a material selection. Nazli reported, "during the presentations, we chose our topics, our materials ourselves, and we prepared our activities on our owns. Therefore, they contributed to me in a great way to learn how to be selective enough while doing my own job". Additionally, as presenters had to prepare lesson plans for the mini-lessons, they started to "notice the importance of standing our projects' aim and also, we have understood that all of our works should have an aim if we want them to be effective on students"(Aysun).

Thirdly, the participants' attitudes towards learning pronunciation changed. According to the participants, the IDE 105 course was different, which changed their bias towards the course due to their previous experiences. They also gained a positive attitude towards it. For example, Osman stated, "finally, I believe that this method annihilate my bias about listening lesson. From now on, I like listening and I like present new things to the class". Some of the participants like Mehmet integrated the benefit of listening and pronunciation to learning English through a holistic perspective:

The pronunciation of words have vital importance in communication. You also begin to understand what you hear when you got this pronunciation knowledge. After I have made this point clear, I understood that grammar, vocabulary and ability of writing or reading in a new language could do nothing without the knowledge of pronunciation and listening for a good communication and language acquisition. Furthermore, the participants reported that they have started to do out of class activities to improve their listening and pronunciation skills. While they were searching for materials, participants learned about new websites. Participants combined these new sources with the activities done in class as an outside class activity to improve their listening and pronunciation skills. For instance, "I now sometimes enter BBC news and search for daily news clips, I listen to some recent news. During listening, I pay attention to pronunciation and criticize myself. "Am I good at understanding this news? "Do I understand enough after listening?" I try to watch and criticize myself as much as I can, when I have enough time" (Duygu). Also, according to the feedback, Semsinur got from her friends about her soft voice, she "did exercise in front of the mirror and in dormitory I made my friend sit far away from me and they listened me while I was speaking and I took their comments about my voice whether they could hear me well or not." These comments seemed to indicate that what was learned on the IDE 105 course supported the participants to become life-long learners who could apply the relevant skills in their life and profession.

### **Implications and concluding remarks**

During this course, the learners were the active ones shaping the curriculum. They contributed to the assessment by evaluating their peers during mini lessons, through self-evaluation reports of presenters and by anonymous surveys. It is believed that the present study makes a contribution to the current literature in terms of pedagogy and indicates that the lack of teachers' voices does

not mean that there is a democratic environment in the group (Alvermann, 1995, 1996; Goldblatt & Smith, 1995; Grant, 1996) because sometimes a pair might be a dominant one. Also, as reported by the participants, learning by doing is more effective than teacher-led activities in terms of motivating the participants to learn more (Spratt & Leung, 2000), fostering of learner autonomy in the classroom (Allwright 1988; Cotterall, 1995; Thompson, 1992; Chau, 1997), preparing them for more active roles in the world of work, and possibly easing the difficulties to achieve native-like speaking skills. Additionally, similar to the findings of Gillespie's (1985), Johnson's (1988) and Wright's (1995) studies, students were motivated as student-produced materials added interest and spontaneity to classroom learning and they did not consider the course as a boring traditional one focusing mostly on passive listening exercises. Besides, participants became self-confident, respected each other and developed as critical thinkers taking responsibility for their own and others' learning (Spratt & Leung, 2000). While at the beginning participants used subtitles and transcriptions from the original resource, later, they transcribed documents on their own. Furthermore, they understood the importance of proper intonation and pronunciation, and teaching those to learners. The section about the importance of the activity in the lesson plans enabled the participants to think of the reasons for choosing the activity and what benefits may be provided to others. Hence, they also became aware of the selection of activities, which led them to include activities related to each other.



## References

- Allwright, D. (1988). Autonomy and individualization in whole-class instruction. In A. Brookes and P. Grundy (Eds.). *Individualization and Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp.35-44). London: Modern English Publications and The British Council.
- Alvermann, D.E. (1995/1996). Peer-led discussions: Whose interests are served? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39, 282-289.
- Assinder, W. (1991). Peer teaching, peer learning: one model. *ELT Journal* 45 (3), 218-229.
- Campbell, C., & Kryszevska, H. (1992). *Learner-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chau, A. (1997). *Engaging Independent Learners in Materials Design: A Case Study*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Department of English. Unpublished master's thesis.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *ELT Journal* 49 (3), 219-227.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Deller, S. 1989. *Lessons from the learner*. London: Longman.
- Gee, J.P. (1999/2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Gillespie, J. B. (1985). Self-produced videotapes in second language instruction. In J. B. Gillespie (Ed.). *Video and Second Language Learning*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Language Learning Laboratory. Abstract from: SilverPlatter File: ERIC Item: ED278243.
- Goldblatt, E., & Smith, M.W. (1995). Alone with each other: Conceptions of discussions in one college classroom community. *Linguistics and Education*, 7, 327-348.
- Grant, R. (1996). The ethics of talk: Classroom conversations and democratic politics. *Teachers College Record*, 67, 470-482.
- Hill, M.R. (1993). *Archival strategies and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, D. (1988). ESL children as teachers: A social view of second language use. *Language Arts* 65 (2),154-163.
- Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). *Participant observation: A methodology for human studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *Learner-centered curriculum design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.
- Rodriguez-Garcia, L. R. (2001). A cognitive framework for the development of speaking reading skills: Can oral peer interaction enhance reading comprehension of authentic texts? Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New York, Buffalo.
- Rost, M. (1990). *Listening in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Spratt, M. & Leung, B. (2000). Peer teaching and peer learning revisited. *ELT Journal*, 54 (3), 218-226.
- Thompson, P. S. (1992). Cognitive styles and the student as teacher. *French Review* 65 (5), 701-707.
- Tudor, I. (1997). *Learner-centeredness as language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenden, A. (1986). What do second language learners know about their language learning? A

- second look at retrospective accounts. *Applied Linguistics* 7(2), 186–201.
- Wenden, A., & J. Rubin. (1987). *Learning strategies in language learning*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Wright, J. E. (1995). Somos todos ayudantes y estudiantes: A demonstration of a classwide peer tutoring program in a modified Spanish class for secondary students identified as learning disabled or academically at-risk. *Education and Treatment of Children* 18 (1), 33-52.

Author: YILDIZ TURGUT is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language Teaching, Mersin University, Turkey. She earned her PhD on Curriculum and Instruction with ESOL/Literacy focus at the University of Florida. Also, she did minors in Educational Psychology focusing on qualitative research in Applied Linguistics and in Educational Technology focusing on technology use in English language teaching. Her dissertation analyzed the social construction of meaning by English language learners with different backgrounds, social collaboration during reading and writing activities at ELI. Her current research focuses on emerging technologies and English language learning. ADDRESS: Mersin Universitesi Egitim Fakultesi Yenisehir Kampusu Mersin, Turkey 33169 [email:yildiztr@gmail.com]