

Understanding Faculty Resistance to New Pedagogies

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Abstract

This paper shows the English Department's tendency towards curriculum change. It deals with a new pedagogy the department intends to experiment in hope to improve the pedagogical system at the English department in Salahaddin University-Erbil (SU). The new pedagogy is known as the student-centered method of teaching. The paper also deals with the obstacles facing the implementation of such method. After attempts at implementing the method for nearly two years by a number of teaching staff members, the researcher has reached the conclusion that most of the teaching staff value the method as effective, but also they resist to its implementation due to a number of factors. These factors are related to student and teacher pedagogical backgrounds, size of the classes, resources, and centralized evaluation systems. It recommends finally that without addressing the above obstacles, the teaching staff would not be very successful in adopting such a method, which is by common consent very formative and effective, hence a drawback in the whole educational process.

Key terms: pedagogy, resistance, student-centered learning, obstacles, adjustment

Introduction

As far as learning English as a foreign language in Iraq is concerned, right from the primary stages of learning, learners are used to a kind of pedagogy that is focused on structure rather than communication. In other words, communication skills such as listening and speaking have been overlooked at the expense of the sole aim of this method, which has been to graduate learners who, after memorizing the rules, can produce grammatically correct sentences. Despite its significance in teaching, the structural approach seems to considerably impair students' creativity. As William Littlewood points out, the structural approach produces passive learners who gain linguistic competence at the expense of the communicative competence (3). Therefore; students admitted to the English departments at the Iraqi universities are used to this method and often suffer from the same shortcomings stated by Littlewood. As a result, the competency of students has not been satisfactory despite high marks they obtain in the Ministry of Education's centralized baccalaureate exams. To handle this problem, the Ministry of Education in Kurdistan Region of Iraq has recently been trying to modify English curriculum focusing on new content as well as new pedagogy. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education has adopted the idea of curriculum development in recent years, basically after 2003.

Compared to the current pedagogy, the new one that the English department at SU intends to adopt is likely to concentrate more on the role of students in the class rather than on that of the teachers. In other words, it focuses on what is commonly known as student-centered classes versus teacher-centered classes. According to the first method, the main objective of the educational process is to make sure that genuine learning occurs. By genuine is meant that students are assisted to construct

knowledge based on their experience and understanding of concepts assigned to them in academia. Roughly speaking and at odds with the concept of genuine learning, is the idea of the reproduction of knowledge, usually resulted from traditional pedagogies. Traditional methods of teaching seem to be primarily focused on teacher instruction expecting from students to replicate information and be able to reproduce in exams what they are taught in class.

The paper hypothesizes that the new method, though more likely to be effective if adopted, cannot be implemented without regulatory, infrastructural, and technical adjustment as it may face significant resistance on the part of the faculty.

Methodology

The paper benefits from both qualitative and quantitative data. Document analysis is adopted. Besides other references, archival documents on students and staff affairs such as knowledge of regulations and the overall educational system are made use of. Another tool used consists of a questionnaire¹ distributed over 43 teaching staff members in three English departments at the Salahaddin University-Erbil in addition to 5 teaching staff members from the English Department at the Cincinnati University-USA (UC). As only 15 replied, and to obtain more accurate findings; the researcher decided to add another tool, which consisted of interviews² with students and staff. A sample of 5 teaching staff members, teaching literature classes, and 90 second year English department students from SU as well as 3 teaching staff members from Cincinnati University, also teaching literature classes, were chosen for the interviews. These interviews were conducted in smaller groups successively in the academic year 2013-2014. Participants discussed and answered questions about their own academic backgrounds, experiences with English and the educational system in general. Questions also centered on Ministry and university regulations and available resources. US teaching staff were invited to discuss differences between both methods, namely, student centered classes versus lecturing. They also answered questions regarding techniques they generally adopted in their literature classes to convey an image of the US educational system and the teaching environment in their classes.

Student centered classes versus teacher-centered classes

Though the concept of +student centered classes is not new, its application in the educational system in Kurdistan Region is almost unseen. Studies have been carried out on the application of student centered methodology focusing on the effectiveness of this concept as well as the problems teachers face while adopting it. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge researches dealing with the obstacles with such comprehensiveness is virtually nonexistent.

A three-year collaboration program between the University of Salahaddin-Erbil in Kurdistan of Iraq and the University of Cincinnati in the United States is another incentive behind this endeavor. This program, funded by the United States Department of State commencing in 2010 and ending in 2013, included online discussions between teaching staff members on matters related to pedagogy and research, teacher exchange, and workshops and seminars here at SU and at UC were all behind the teaching staff's experimentation with the new method.

¹ For the questionnaire, please see the appendix.

² As regards the contents of the interviews, the researcher held meetings with the participants further discussing the questions presented in the questionnaire, in addition to other questions as stated above.

Perhaps the main reason behind adopting the conventional method, which adopted a structural approach to the teaching of English in Iraq, has been the fact that teaching English in Iraq has been focused mainly on English grammar. There has been very little attention given to the literary reader series, which comes late in high school English syllabi, and which is regarded as a secondary subject. Therefore; owing to the teachers' and students' background in the structural approach from the primary school to the university, this approach has affected the way we teach literature and language classes as well. When it comes to literature classes, students' lack of communicative competence becomes a major problem. Consequently, a lecturing method is adopted according to which the teacher almost always has a leading role in the class. Though the teacher asks questions now and then and tries to get students' feedback checking their understanding of the topic, he or she does most of the talking in the class. In such classes, no matter how determined the teacher to create a student-centered environment is, he often has to interfere encouraging the students to participate. Due to such interferences by the teacher, students are less encouraged to express their ideas; hence their viewpoints are most likely to be overlooked. As Leo Jones points out "constant intervention isn't likely to encourage students to behave autonomously" (5). Thus, students copy down the ideas of the teacher, and there is very little room for genuine contribution.

On the contrary, the student-centered method values student practice and seeks their contribution to the class. In an article entitled "Navigating the bumpy road to student-centered instruction," Richard M. Felder and Rebecca Brent discuss in details the differences between student-centered and teacher centered classes. They state that

In the traditional approach to higher education, the burden of communicating course material resides primarily with the instructor. In student-centered instruction (SCI), some of this burden is shifted to the students. SCI is a broad approach that includes such techniques as substituting active learning experiences for lectures, holding students responsible for material that has not been explicitly discussed in class, assigning open-ended problems and problems requiring critical or creative thinking that cannot be solved by following text examples, involving students in simulations and role-plays, assigning a variety of unconventional writing exercises, and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. (NP)

Accordingly, student-engaging activities such as report writing, in-class activities, homework assignments, group and pair work, student presentations, and regular teacher feedback besides a new method of assessment that places more value on student practice are all examples of the student-centered techniques to replace the old-fashioned method of lecturing. The teacher adopts such practices and plays the role of a guide managing the class and interfering only occasionally. Jones sums up what the teacher should do in a student-centered class. He states that

The teacher's role is more that of a facilitator than instructor; the students are active participants in the learning process. The teacher (and the textbook) help to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a

member of the class as a participant in the learning process. (2)

Other scholars also stress on the role of the teacher as a facilitator. In "Current approaches and teaching methods. Bilingual programmes," Gabriel Tejada Molina, María Luisa Pérez Cañado, and Gloria Luque Agulló define the role of the teacher in student-centered classes stating,

Teacher roles also change drastically from traditional lockstep organisations: (s)he speaks less, acts as facilitator of learning and is responsible for the creation of a highly structured and well-organised teaching environment which promotes successful group-based learning. (42)

It is inferred that despite the significance of teacher-led work, teachers need to avoid too much lecturing for it is a spoon-feeding method that produces passive learners who only reproduce knowledge. This has been one of the prioritized missions of the SU and UC linkage program. After attempts for two years to apply the new method in the department of English at SU, the researcher personally along with some other staff members faced some barriers, most obvious five of which constitute the question of this paper. The findings sections below attest to the obstacles we face while trying to implement this method.

Findings

The results show that, with rare exceptions, all of the participants (students and teachers at SU) agreed to the fact that the system is very teacher-based. What they studied in the pre-university stages, they all stated, was based on the structural approach. They pointed out how the focus was always on grammatical rules, and that they never, in 8 years of pre-university English study, moved from the sentence-making level to the writing of paragraphs or from listening to their teachers to speaking on their own. Therefore, the students agreed that the English they learned in high school could not be of potential use to them in the university. These ideas were verified by the participant teaching staff who agreed that the great majority of the newcomers have a rather basic command of English.

Students are not given real chances of participation due to lack of almost all sorts of student-centered techniques of teaching. The participating students stated that student-centered activities such; group-work, pair-work, literature circles, students' creative writings, students' reports and presentations have never been adopted neither in pre-university study, nor at the university. They went on to say that some of the above techniques were even unheard of, whereas the UC teaching staff participants stated that such techniques are often used in their classes. Once the researcher explained to them these sorts of techniques, the SU staff stated that they would love to adopt them because they would give more chances to students for participation. They all rejected the idea that teachers should take the leading role in the class and leave the students as passive listeners. They also pointed out that teaching staff members never consulted the students about the methods they adopted in teaching, hence students' views and feedback about such methods were not and are not valued at all while the UC staff had a completely different view as they focused on the significance of students' feedback in improving the type of methodology they used. The teaching staff also asserted the effectiveness and the significance of the student centered method. However, they all believed that chances for the implementation of the method are weak in the English department.

The participants all believed that the admission system values grades only. It does not take students' desires into account. The students remarked that they never knew about the mission and the vision of the English Department before they applied for English. Even though they were second year students, many of them were still not sure they knew the mission of the department. Pre-admission tests were supported by all participants. The teaching staff also reiterated that a filtering test before admission to the department is very important.

As for the size of the classes, the teaching staff stated that they never had classes with less than 35 students; they even had classes with bigger numbers such as 55 students sometimes. They all made it clear that large classes with small-sized rooms and fixed chairs make it so difficult for students to move around in the class. With the lack of free internet access for students on campus, and the shortage of up-to-date references, nearly 4 out of the 90 students stated that they could buy books online with credit cards, and the rest said they had to resort to free online material for certain homework. All students also complained that they could not freely access the university library books as they are not allowed to see the books before they could search in the indexes for titles and authors. They would then choose books based on titles or authors while having no idea about the content of the books, and once they examine the content, they usually have to turn them down when they find out that such books are not the ones they expected to get; a procedure that makes borrowing of books altogether a tedious process.

Both participating teaching staff members and students pointed out that the assessment system was not encouraging or motivating. When students were told about the activities they were expected to carry out in a student centered environment, they all believed that around 15% or 20% of the grading that usually goes for daily participation according to the regulations makes absolutely no sense. Teachers also pointed out that with the current centralized system of assessment; they find it so difficult and almost impossible to encourage real student engagement in class participation. The UC staff agreed that students needed to be better rewarded as far as assessment was concerned in order to motivate them for more work.

Discussion

In the light of the findings above, the teaching staff find it difficult to implement the student centered method. It is a method very much welcomed by the students who like to change from passive spectators to active learners. The participation of the staff as well as students in the interviews along with the other archival documents all inclusively point to five major barriers when it comes to the implementation of the new method:

1. Pedagogical and scientific background

As for pedagogy, it is naturally difficult to cope with a drastically different methodology that demands more practice and hard work from both the students and the teachers. While we actually started to experiment with the student-centered teaching strategies, and despite the fact that students stated earlier that they liked to try them, it became apparent that the learners were not very responsive as they are used to sit in the class as passive listeners who neither physically nor mentally engage in class activities. Since they have been used to a different pedagogy from the primary school, it is much harder to bring about a radical change in pedagogy at the university level. Particularly, *reserved* teachers seem to be less enthusiastic when it comes to curriculum development. The scientific committee's follow up at the English department in 2012 showed that out of thirty teachers, only six of them *tried*

to adopt a student-centered method of teaching.¹ As improving the learning strategies and moving the educational process forward, though time-consuming, are very significant responsibilities of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, curriculum development does not only need to be encouraged, but it also needs to be closely monitored by decision-makers.

Furthermore, students' scientific background is also very important. The graduates of the English Department gain BA in English language and literature. This clearly means they study linguistics and English literature. It also means that the complexity of the topics they study should correspond with the knowledge realistically required for a BA degree in English. Our learners usually do not have a satisfactory background in English literature, and while at the English Department they are expected to study Shakespeare and James Joyce for instance. So, having the literature course content at odds with the scientific background of our learners on the one hand, and to avoid oversimplifications resulted from student contribution on the other, some teachers are sometimes obliged to lecture in order to teach a topic such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The pretext for this is that student contribution due to poor literary background is lacking. This idea seems to be at odds with student centered learning approaches maintaining that "focus is not just on what is taught but on how effective learning should be promoted" (Di Napoli 3). However, to gain an internationally recognized BA degree in English language and literature means that undergraduate students are supposed to cover a program the complexity of which is worthy of BA in English language and literature.

Furthermore, as far as linguistic classes are concerned, in modules such as syntax, semantics, phonology, and general linguistics, there is much need for the teachers to lecture in order to explain arid theoretical topics, and to demand too much student practice in this respect might hinder the learning process rather than improve it. It follows that the pedagogical and scientific background as well as the course content are important factors affecting teaching and learning outcomes.

2. Central admission vs. student desire

Central Admission to the universities poses another problem. Students' admission to scientific departments is centralized and is always determined by the grades. Personal choice does not always play a significant role, and pre-admission tests are not conducted. Without pre-admission tests, applicants cannot be filtered. This indicates that some students are motivated, while others are not because they have not chosen their field. Thus, unmotivated students are not quick to respond when it comes to class activities. It is very common to have some very active students in a group, while others wait for their friends to do the work for them. It is also common to have students realize one or two years after their admission that English is not what they should be majored in. In 2012, several junior students left to other department realizing after three years of studying English that they chose the wrong field². It follows that teachers often have students whose scientific levels are far from close to each other. This big gap in the level of the learners is a problem for teachers as they find it difficult to control students' differentiation.

¹ - This information is available in the departmental archives.

² - Statistics are available in the department and the college registration unit archives.

3. Dealing with large classes

In an article entitled “Student-Centered Teaching in Large Classes with Limited Resources,” Susan Renaud, Elizabeth Tannenbaum, and Phillip Stantial sum up the major challenges of teaching large classes as follows; “(1) managing the classroom, (2) using pair and group work to encourage cooperative learning, (3) teaching with limited resources, and (4) motivating students in heterogeneous classes.” (2)

We face the same challenges at the English department. Thus, an additional difficulty impeding the implementation of the learner-centered method is that of large classes. Jones believes that “the ideal size for a student-centered language class is probably 12” (4). With such a number, there is a big chance for everyone to have a share of the activities. Unfortunately, this remains ideal and is not the reality of our classes because they are ranging between 45 and 55 students per group. They are often hard to control, particularly in group work activities and students’ presentations for only a small number might have the chance of participation in the class, while the majority remain inactive. More difficulties arise due to the rigid administrative rule regarding class duration. In humanities, the class duration is always 50 minutes. Particularly in conversation classes, the big number of the students kills the chance for good participation and since English is not the mother tongue, they need to be closely monitored so that they may not speak Kurdish or Arabic. A simple statistical operation shows that throughout a whole semester of four months, each student has the chance to speak for less than 45 minutes in conversation classes.

This does not seem to be a smaller problem in literature classes because having nearly two hundred students—a very common thing especially if the teacher is doing two classes—makes it also difficult for him to evaluate hundreds of reports and assignments and to give feedback to so many students. This is why the teachers find it less tiring when they resort to lecturing and do not demand much writing practice from the students, which in return is another discouragement for students’ contribution.

4. Class accommodation and resources

In many countries around the world, schools suffer from poor accommodation and lack of necessary technical facilities and resources. Dealing with Haiti as an example, Renaud et al, state that in places where only human resources are available besides chalk and blackboard, where the simplest technology cannot be provided, where the crowded classes have fixed chairs, and where lack of air conditioning are common, much of what is said and written about language teaching becomes irrelevant and even *laughable* (Renaud et al 1). Physical class arrangement and the availability of technical and other resources are certainly important and play a vital role in the learning process. Fixed chairs and lack of technical and electronic facilities such as computers and overhead projectors, and the lack of regular maintenance, are likely to impede a student-centered approach. Due to several decades of turmoil, instability, and corruption in Iraq, the physical condition of schools and universities in Iraq could be well-compared to that of Haiti. So far, many classes suffer from the shortages mentioned above and the teachers have no more than the whiteboard to resort to. Not being able to move the students around because of fixed chairs makes group work and student interaction virtually impossible. Sometimes one finds some students very enthusiastic to work in pairs and groups and to do seminars and presentations in the class, but is usually disappointed because of sudden power cuts and other technical shortcomings such as poor maintenance due to lack of experienced technicians.

5. Assessment

Assessment and grading should value students' efforts in and outside the class. Monthly and final exams cannot be the only criteria for student evaluation, particularly if one is to consider an approach that lays more attention on student practice. In student-centered classes, students need to be better rewarded for participation than in teacher-centered classes. The regulations for grading in the field of humanities are centralized.¹ Only 10% of the grading goes for daily class participation. This includes reports, seminars, and presentations. The rest of the grading goes for monthly and final exams. This form is traditionally associated with teacher-centered classes in which the wisdom behind an exam is to find out the quantity of information and facts students gathered or learnt from a course. As Di Napoli puts it, such a kind of assessment is only summative since it is based on a method that does not produce long-term learners because the knowledge they show in the tests are reproductions of facts they collected from the course "without taking much care about whether students are able to process these into 'knowledge' which is 'usable' and 'transferable' in both their professional and personal lives" (Di Napoli 2).

Opposite to this conception is formative assessment as Di Napoli points out. He stresses on the learning outcome of the test, which is focused on the quality of the knowledge gained and on the usability of such knowledge in the future life of the students. He states:

This means that its main aim (that of the test) is not to 'quantify' a student's performance in terms of the number of 'facts' they are supposed to acquire but understanding (and helping them to understand) the processes through which they arrive at conclusions in solving a given task/problem. In this way, the student is supported in making sense of their 'journey' through knowledge construction. Constructive and continuous feedback is paramount here. Students work with teachers to define performance criteria and develop self-and-peer assessment skills.

(3)

Due to summative assessments, it is therefore quite natural to have less motivated students complaining about doing their homework and remaining inactive in the class because they would not care much about the very small percentage of the grading allocated for their daily practice. This has also affected the teachers' conception of students' homework and in-class participation. They do not demand much practice from students and do not ask for reports and writing assignments because they find it hard to give feedback to so many students on the one hand, and traditionally the teachers and the students believe that only 10% of the grading does not require much extra work and student practice in and outside the class on the other hand.

¹ -Regulations for assessment and grading are available at all university departments.

Conclusion

It could be inferred that compared to the old-fashioned method of lecturing, the student-centered methodology is more appropriate if student creativity becomes an end. The SU and UC collaboration program has resulted in very positive development as far as curriculum development at SU is concerned, the English Department being one example. The program has acquainted the staff at the English Department with new methodology and new course design techniques. Such methodology and techniques value student efforts and place much attention on quality knowledge gained through student-centered activities. Besides, and more importantly, SU's work with UC has added much to the staff's conception of curriculum development. However, despite willingness for change and curriculum development, there is still much resistance. Factors generally related to the educational system such as; the teaching methodology, teacher and student background and other administrative shortcomings such as; admission to the university, the problem of large classes, class accommodation, availability of resources, and assessment systems all remain as actual barriers before the method could be successfully implemented.

Recommendations

To address the problems discussed in this paper, the researcher offers the following recommendations:

1. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan Region should reconsider the central admission system and should attempt to find mechanisms for a new enrollment system that, despite considering the grades, gives more freedom of choice to the applicants.
2. Pre-admission or filtering tests should be introduced to the admission system particularly at the English departments.
3. Physical shape of the classes should be re-arranged. Movable chairs should replace fixed ones. More space has to be worked for.
4. IT maintenance should be regularly made and more IT technicians should be appointed to do frequent checking.
5. Number of students in each class should go with international standards, hence reduced.
6. Students should have access to up-to-date references and internet access on campus.
7. Student evaluation and grading regulations should be modified. Clearly this is because the student-centered method values student participation as the primary medium of learning and considers it an end in itself. Therefore, to achieve further motivation students need to be better rewarded for activities such as group work, pair work, presentations, reports, and researches they prepare.

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Appendix Questionnaire

This questionnaire is an attempt to find out the obstacles that both teachers and learners face in the teaching and learning process, particularly when teachers try to adopt a student-centered method of teaching in the English Department. It is part of a research entitled *Understanding Faculty Resistance to New Pedagogies*. Your honest participation is highly valued as it will certainly contribute to the educational process in the department and will hopefully move this process forward. Thank you very much for your time and effort.

1- Which one of the following concepts you would like to be focused in the class?

- a- Grammatical rules b- Communication skills

2- Do you generally believe that the 12 year pre-university English learning was effective or it was lacking?

- a- effective b- Lacking

3- If it was lacking, to which one of the following reasons do you ascribe the reason?

- a- teaching methodology b- Students' lack of interest in English
 c- the program content
 d- other (please specify)

4- Which area of the following you would like to see modified?

- a- Method of teaching b- program content c- none
 d- other (please specify)

5- Do you support the idea of having the following activities in the class replacing the lecturing method:

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1- Report writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2- Research writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 3- Group work inside the class | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 4- Group work outside the class | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 5- Pair work | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 6- Students presentations (learning by teaching) | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 7- Games | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 8- Interviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 9- Information gaps | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

6- On what basis do you think students need to be admitted to the English Department?

- a- Central admission only
 b- Central admission plus personal choice
 c- Personal choice plus a pre admission test

7- Tick one on of the following points:

You receive complaints from students that:

- 1- The topics are generally difficult to understand
2- The topics are generally too simple
3- They are neither simple nor difficult

8- How many students do you like to have in your class?

- a-20 stds b- 30 stds
 c- 40 stds d- 50stds

Please provide a reason why?

9- Do you support the idea of using technology such as:

a- Internet Yes No

Can you have access to the internet every day? Yes No

b- The use of power-point presentations Yes No

Are you satisfied with the technological facilities maintenance in the department? Yes No

c- The use of audio-visual aids such as TV and Tape Recorders
Yes No

10-What is your opinion about the class accommodation?

- a- Very good b- Good c- Fair
 d- poor