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**Quality in Education**

**Teacher as Learning Facilitator in ELT**

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**Abstract:** The classroom is the magic active scenery where many educational things take place simultaneously. Intellectual, emotional, socio-cultural, motivational and curricular factors corroborate their influence on classroom environments, whether we deal with traditional models of teaching or with the constructivist approaches. The growing demand for language teachers, English in particular, has determined a new vision of language teaching strategies. The cutting-edge technology has created a fertile ground which successfully fosters the teacher –student communication, emphasizing the teacher’s role to guide students and to generate a change in their learning approach and in eliciting useable knowledge. This way, the teacher has a larger ability to convert knowledge into practical information that is of real help and value to students. Students are involved in a continuous educational scheme and are tested on what they have learned. This ensures they can always enjoy the benefits of active learning from expert teachers. The present paper deals with a brief analysis of the role of teacher as learning facilitator and its importance for student acquisition process, eliciting some strategies in support of collaborative and student-centered learning.

**Keywords:** teaching strategies; facilitate; self-directed learning; motivation; communication

## **1 Introduction**

Teaching is a complex cognitive activity whether involved in a teacher-centered or student-centered classroom (Leinhardt,1997, pp. 1-54) and requires a wide range of skills to allow students to play an active role in guiding their own learning.

Research has proved that teaching and learning are complex processes influenced by various external and internal factors where teacher acts as an intermediary, facilitating students’ learning. His or her role is to guide students and to generate a change in their learning approach and in eliciting useable knowledge. The increasing demand of student learning autonomy has moved the emphasis away from the teacher and closer to the student, because the teacher’s role is to introduce topics of discussion, encourage sharing of personal perspectives, inducing participation and thinking.

Teaching could involve teacher-centered and student-centered strategies. Teacher-centered strategies see the teacher as a transmitter of information, outlining what the teacher does, whereas student-centered ones focus on students’ accomplishments, “bringing about conceptual change in students’ understanding of the world” (Biggs,1999, p.61). From a traditional perspective, students expect to be taught, considering that the teacher’s responsibility is to deliver the information, that he or she is considered to be an expert in his or her field who conveys knowledge to learners. The main purpose of the student-centered approach is to develop communicative competences and to provide the English learners with the necessary language tools for interaction with another languages and cultures.

So, the present paper examines the role of the teacher focusing on teaching methods, facilitation strategies and realistic perspectives in language teaching.

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## 2 Paper Content

The student-centered view of teaching has imposed a major shift in the task of the teacher emphasizing his or her role as a facilitator or manager of students' educational process. Teachers should facilitate change, especially because learners are resistant to change and react as passive learners. Facilitators should allow students to determine their learning needs and objectives and make use of various resources. They conduct discussions and grease the wheels for real world examples and achieve this through a considerable system of techniques and methods. Malcolm Knowles described the "fundamental and terribly difficult" change from teacher to facilitator of learning. "It required that I focus on what was happening to the students rather than on what I was doing. It required that I divest myself as me - an authentic human being, with feelings, hopes, aspirations, insecurities, worries, strengths and weaknesses. It required that I extricate myself from the compulsion to pose as an expert who had mastered any given body of content and, instead, join my students honestly as a continuing co-learner. I found myself, for example, functioning primarily, as a procedural guide and only secondarily as a resource for content information" (Knowles, 1975). He has also identified seven elements extremely important for the role of learning facilitator:

- a. Climate context: familiarize the students with the learning environment;
- b. Planning: determine the learning activities;
- c. Designing the learning needs: set the goals so that students take over the learning process and compare their acquisitions with the required objectives;
- d. Setting goals: help students to transfer their needs into clear learning objectives;
- e. Designing a learning plan: students design their own learning plans and establish strategies to access resources;
- f. Engaging in learning activities: the tutor determines which activities should be dealt individually or collectively, teacher-led or student-led;
- g. Evaluating learning outcomes: provide constructive feedback to the students to increase the self-directed learning process.

Teachers' role is to help and encourage students develop some skills, being at the same time a "source of information, advice and knowledge" (Jones, 2007, pp.13-25).

They also should find the right balance between teacher-led and student-centered activities tailoring the course to offer learners more talking time. But, of course, students may react differently. Some are less autonomous and depend on their teachers, while others take advantage of their independence. Especially in such situations, teachers should come up with motivational strategies to develop personal commitment and self-confidence with a huge impact on achievement in education. At some points during the educational activities, teachers' role can change from teacher-led to student-centered and switch back. He or she should create a learning environment which sustains the learning activities suitable to achieve the aimed learning outcomes. All components in the teaching system: the curriculum, the objectives, the pedagogical methods, the assessment criteria and tasks interact and greatly influence the acquisition process.

"Motivation is the product of good teaching, not its prerequisite" (Biggs, 1999, p. 61).

Classroom communication should be initiated and developed in an informal atmosphere, open to exchanges of ideas where the learning resource materials must also be integrated in the activities. The teacher's as well as the student's outlook on life, emotions, personal experiences, cultural and social background influence classroom communication and the learning approach.

Some students say:

- Why do I have to work in pairs or in groups?

- I get embarrassed when I speak in English, because I make plenty of mistakes and I don't master the vocabulary adequately.
- My classmates will laugh at me if I make mistakes.
- I panic if I don't find the right words.

In a teacher-centered class, learners tend to depend on the teacher most of the time, waiting for correction, appraisal, instructions, avoiding communicating with one another. They feel insecure, overlooking the great contribution they really have if working in pairs or groups. The teacher should put emphasis on working together, thus developing their language skills and encouraging their active participation in the learning process and assisting them. Depending on the tasks, students can work alone, in pairs or in groups. Preparing and taking out the main ideas, drafting, making notes before a debate, solving vocabulary or grammar activities are suitable for individual work, whereas contrasting, comparing, enlarging certain topics, reading, some listening activities can be done in pairs or groups. But regardless of the type and purpose of the assignment, the teacher monitors, guides and encourages students, correcting when necessary. Collaborative tasks trigger great benefits with huge impact on students. They gain more self-confidence and communicate more, exchange ideas and learn from each other, become more involved referring to personally relevant topics and a lot spontaneous, and use English in realistic contexts. Pair or group activities encourage students to take a more personal approach in using English and increase confidence in their own usage of the language, taking advantage of the friendly atmosphere. Group assignments suit better to debates which are prone to develop argumentation.

Undoubtedly, there are also some drawbacks. Some of them may be tongue-tied and would try to switch to their mother tongue, they may feel anxious, embarrassed and fail to demonstrate the language requirements and successfully continue a conversation.

How should teachers handle these situations?

Monitoring all class and getting around to all groups in a single lesson is hardly achievable, especially in larger classes, so the teacher should give attention in the next session. Also, positioning students closely to talk softly and hear one another, makes it easy for the teacher to supervise them. In most cases, classes are made up of mixed ability students. They might have varied command of the language and elicit different items, or they may be good or bad at different skills. They also carry their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses and learning methods to the class. Students have a lot to gain if teachers set pair or group work according to various class activities, trying to mix weaker and stronger students and also tailoring tasks.

Another extremely important aspect with a great influence on the learning process is personality, varying from extroverted to shy, from bossy to reserved, from creative to rather unimaginative. Some students tend to dominate the activity, while others are mere spectators, losing interest and enthusiasm and waiting for the class to finish. Rearranging learners in groups and pairs is a good method to build confidence as well as appointing dominant students as "team leaders", but switch roles to give them all the opportunity to conduct a discussion. Shy students can be stimulated and motivated by putting them in groups rather than in pairs.

Time is a key element in running successfully an activity. Students should be given a time limit, so that they can better and wisely deal with their assignments. They should feel they have enough time to handle the tasks, thus offering them the possibility to develop a topic using relevant and appropriate constructions. Allocating a longer time gives students extra moments to reflect in silence and prepare before dealing with tasks. If they enjoy a particular activity, it would be wiser to prolong, otherwise it is advisable to cut it short.

Practice has proved that high-interest topics such as *Travelling, Leisure activities, Food* seem to raise the students' interest, whereas other boring topics tend to demotivate them. It is also well-known that it's almost impossible to involve all students all the time, but the more varied the topics are, the more chances we have to engage as many as possible. Some topics may appeal to students, especially if

their discussions are based on experience. "Personal experiences of a topic are always more interesting than general knowledge about it" (Jones, 2007, pp. 13-25). Nevertheless, all students must explore less challenging themes because they provoke students' acquisition and activate their passive vocabulary.

English classes prove to be a huge opportunity for students to interact, to share their views on a certain topic, to talk about personal feelings and experiences which, otherwise, would be less likely to happen. Even after a careful selection of topics with challenging questions, we witness a speechless class, unwilling to plunge into a conversation. Is the topic too difficult? Is it too boring? Many other questions spring out in teachers' mind, trying to identify the trouble-spot. Apart from organizing ideas, language can also be a huge barrier which many students find it difficult to overcome. Before going deeper into a topic, visuals can break the ice and stimulate the change of ideas. For the easily panic ones, making notes and taking their time could represent a real helping hand. "Failure is demoralizing, success is motivating. Having fun as they use English experimentally in class and succeeding in communicating with one other is a rewarding experience for students" (Jones, 2007, pp.13-25).

Sometimes pedagogical teaching approaches may seem useless when some students may prefer to chat in their native language or simply, refuse to take part in the debates. How can we overcome this resistance? This usually takes time when persuading them not to miss the opportunity of putting English into practice in real conversations. Students' responsibility and learning independence contribute to the development of some features of lifelong learners-motivation, self-assessment, time management and the skills to access information. Student-centered teaching approaches involve active learning (problem-solving, debates, brainstorming, answering questions), collaborative learning (pair or group work) and inductive teaching and learning such as problem or project-based tasks, case-based learning where students acquire new information in the context of addressing the questions and problems.

### 3 Conclusion

Research and practice have demonstrated that student-centered methods are superior to the traditional teacher-centered approaches emphasizing the long-term benefits: developing critical thinking and problem solving skills, increase self-confidence and enhance communication abilities. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of student-centered approach is the positive impact on the classroom, making teaching more energizing, non-repetitive and stimulating, thus generating meaningful outcomes for both students and teachers.

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