

SEMIOTIC APPROACH AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

GÖSTERGEBİLİM YAKLAŞIMI VE İNGİLİZ DİLİ ÖĞRENİMİ VE ÖĞRETİMİNE KATKILARI

Olca SERT*

ABSTRACT: Semiotics is a progressing and promising discipline with its applications in many fields of study. As a bridge between semiotics and foreign language teaching (FLT), educational semiotics has started to attract attention of many scholars, English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors and teachers all over the world. It is obvious that the consideration of semiotic approach in FLT has promising results and may lead to long-term success in learning a foreign language with its applicable and pertinent techniques that are learner-centered. In this article, basic terminology of semiotics and its possible applications to foreign language learning settings are introduced in order to help teachers of English to have a heightened awareness of the semiotic approach. Throughout the paper, it is claimed that the consideration of the semiotic signs of the target culture in teaching a foreign language is vital, since a language cannot be separated from its culture.

Keywords: semiotics, ELT, target culture, educational semiotics, awareness

ÖZET: Göstergebilim, bir çok alandaki uygulamaları ile ilerleyen ve gelişime açık bir disiplindir. Göstergebilim ve yabancı dil öğretimi arasında bir köprü olan eğitimsel göstergebilim, dünyada bir çok bilimadamı ve İngilizce öğretmeninin ilgisini çekmiştir. Açıkça görülmektedir ki, yabancı dil öğretiminde göstergebilimsel yaklaşım öğrenci-odaklı olan uygulanabilir teknikleriyle uzun süreli başarıya yol açma konusunda umut vaat eden sonuçlar ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makalede, göstergebilimin temel terimleri ve yabancı dil öğrenim ortamlarına olası uygulamaları, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin göstergebilim alanında farkındalıklarını arttıracak şekilde tanıtılmaktadır. Çalışmada, dil kültürden ayırmayacağından ötürü, hedef kültürdeki göstergebilim işaretlerinin göz önünde bulundurulmasının çok önemli olduğu iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: göstergebilim, ingiliz dili öğretimi, hedef kültür, eğitimsel göstergebilim, farkındalık

1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics, the study of signs, has been an area of interest for scholars in various disciplines mainly because of its inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary nature, and semiotic approach to any field of study is increasingly attracting growing attention. The application of semiotic theories to education has recently gained significant importance and led to the emergence of a new field of study called educational semiotics. The particular purpose of this article is to present and discuss the insights of semiotics (with emphasis on educational semiotics) by bridging it to FLT.

Throughout the paper, the contribution of semiotics to education- specifically to ELT- will be discussed and the ways how semiotic approach to pedagogy leads to betterment in language learning process will be handled comprehensively. This particular aim of the study, in a way, will take the paper to be more than a literature review on educational semiotics, but a step toward the consideration of semiotics in ELT settings and hopefully will move to the consideration of semiotic approach in English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) classes in Turkey with great emphasis on the importance of the teaching of target culture.

* Research Assistant, Hacettepe University, sertolcay@yahoo.com

Following the purpose of the study, semiotics in general will be presented briefly including its definition, historical background, its key figures and basic concepts. Next, the focus will shift to educational semiotics and the applications of semiotic approach and its theories in language teaching. This will be followed by a critical discussion on the semiotic approach in language classrooms.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE CONCEPT OF 'SIGN'

There are trends in semiotics- as it is the case in all sciences- that are determined and affected by different approaches. There are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and these two figures depart in handling the basic concept of semiotics, the sign, with two different perspectives; the former as 'signs as a part of social life' and the latter as 'formal doctrine of signs related to logic' (Chandler, 2002). Some definitions of semiotics can be given as follows:

"Semiotics is the knowledge of semiosis (the action of signs); it is the theoretical accounting for signs and what they do" (Deely, 1990, p.105).

"Semiotics is the study of semiosis. Semiosis is the building of structures of experience via signs" (Cunningham, 1992, p. 173).

"Semiotics includes visual and verbal as well as tactile and olfactory signs as they form code systems which systematically communicate information or messages" (Tobin, 1990, p. 4).

As these definitions indicate, "the sign" is the basic unit in semiotics. But what is a sign indeed? The two-part model of sign-as suggested by Saussure- is a combination of the signifier and the signified (Figure 1). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is mutual and reciprocal which means that one cannot speak of a sign freed from its signifier or signified. They interact with each other and directly affect one another. Basically, the signifier is the form that the sign takes and the signified is the concept that the form represents. According to Saussure (1966), "a sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern" (p. 66). So, when you think of a "tree", the tree as an object is the signified and the sound pattern (or in written form) is the signifier which represents the tree as coded culturally to our minds (Figure 2). It is the case that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (except for onomatopoeic words) and highly culture dependent.

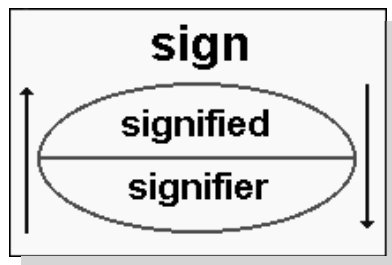


Figure 1. The relationship between the signifier and the signified (Chandler, 1994)

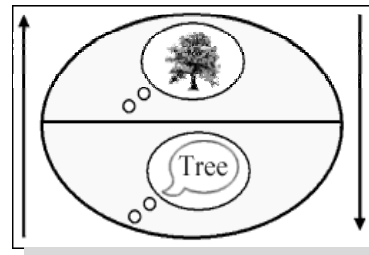


Figure 2. The object and the concept. (Chandler, 1994)

As Chandler (2002) clarifies, Peirce has a triadic model of sign (Figure 3) as; representment (the form which the sign takes), interpretant (the sense of the sign), and object (to which the sign refers). It may be claimed that Peirce's model of the sign is more feasible from Saussure's in that it considers the sign as a physical, psychological and linguistic entity. It is physical in that the "object" is a physical entity which can be perceived through our senses. It is psychological in that we have the image of the object (interpretant) coded to our minds after a socio-cultural and socio-linguistic enculturation process. It is "linguistic" in that

the sign has a linguistic representment either in spoken or written form. Peirce introduces types of sign as icon, symbol and index, which will further be discussed in section 3 in relation to education.

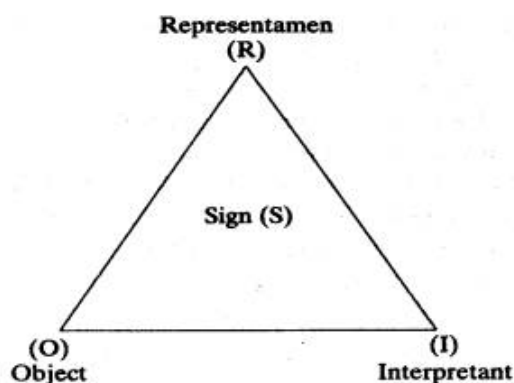


Figure 3. Peirce's model of sign (Nadin, 1993)

Drawing upon the conventional and arbitrary nature of signs, they seem to be culture oriented. Since a culture cannot be separated from its language, the consideration of cultural signs is an important phenomenon in FLT environments. The signs and codes of the native culture is the absolute source of mother tongue interference in learning a foreign language. Throughout the acquisition of the native language, the signs of the native culture and its language are coded into a person's brain with the signifiers which belong to the native culture. In learning a foreign language, the equivalences of these signifiers are loaded to the brain which leads to a neurological confusion. When you are thinking, speaking or writing in the target language, the production process lasts longer as you should go through the object, the interpretant, the representment and the equivalence of that representment in the target language (Figure 4).

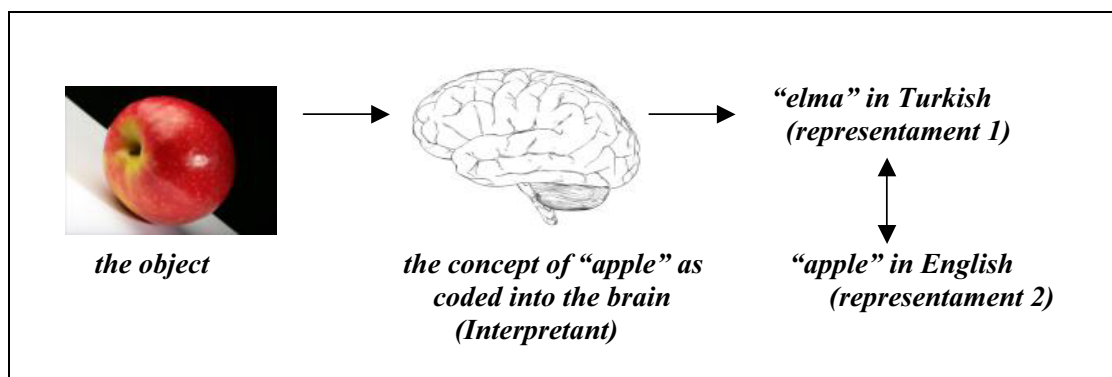


Figure 4. The processing of target language item with a semiotic perspective

Considering Figure 4, it is possible to claim that the last stage of foreign language processing determines the quality of target language production. If the target language item is coded to the long term memory systematically through adequately frequent repetition in meaningful contexts with correct "signs", the outcome will obviously be automaticity. When the concept in the target language is more abstract or has not been coded to the long term memory effectively, the production process may last longer or may not occur.

As it can be understood, sign and code systems of a specific culture are made up of the interaction between signs, structures and experiences constructed via these signs. As each culture has its own systematic signs and codes, learning the language of the target culture requires the exact coding of the sign systems of the target culture. In this sense, educational semiotics tries to find ways to improve and accelerate the process of learning a foreign language.

3. EDUCATIONAL SEMIOTICS AND ELT

The idea of using semiotics in education is related to the fact that culture plays a vital role in learning environments. Since a particular culture is interwoven with the social signs and social codes (which is the concern of semiotics), educational settings are inevitably shaped by these cultural elements. When the awareness of these social codes and signs are heightened in the learning environment, it would have promising results. The case is more important in foreign language learning due to the fact that a foreign language is the product of a foreign culture and accordingly subject to different social codes and social signs, which the students and teachers should be aware of. This may also be inferred from Eco's words (as cited in Piper, 1992) in claiming that language cannot be understood independently from its interplay with other cultural codes, including those which carry social understanding.

When the teaching of specific language skills is considered, a semiotic perspective can adequately help in presenting new content to the students. For example, while teaching new vocabulary, if new words are reinforced with relevant pictures, the result will be the long term coding of this target language item. To illustrate, a no-smoking sign or no-parking sign can be accompanied by the sentences written on the board or the utterances of native speakers or the teachers. This also helps with the long-term coding of certain grammar structures to the memory, as each sign will signal not only the related vocabulary, but also the grammar in use with contextual clues. The meaningful contextualization in this way will surely contribute positively to the learning process.

Presentation of the signs of the target culture plays a significant role at the production level. If the teacher uses previously presented authentic pictures to activate students' memory before speaking and writing activities, more concepts will be activated in students' mind before the production process. In this line of thinking, fruitful results in written or oral mode can be gathered due to the activation of related and various structures and concepts. The case is not only valid for the use of pictures, but also presentation or demonstration of non-verbal behaviors of the target culture. It is possible to suggest that the linguistic messages modified with cultural signs (in the form of visual materials or cultural audio-visual items) will be received and comprehended within the code system of the target culture.

Another contribution of the use of semiotic approach is related to the evaluation of written output of the students. In the evaluation process, the teacher can make use of particular signs, which will make the feedback more efficient than using long sentences and comments in student papers. A suggestion for a set of symbols is given by Willis (1981), which is claimed to have reached fruitful results when compared to earlier student works. The list of the symbols is as follows:

- S- spelling
- S/p- singular, plural
- C- concord (agreement; subject,verb)
- W/O- word order
- P- punctuation
- T- tense
- V- vocabulary, wrong word or usage
- Ir- irrelevant information, etc. (Willis, 1981, pp.172-173)

There are numerous ways to apply the principles of semiotics to foreign language learning environments. The problem emerges from the selection of suitable methods and teaching techniques which may be feasible in foreign language classes. Therefore, it would be appropriate to present the terminology related to educational semiotics with reference to FLT, and discuss possible teaching suggestions. Hopefully, this will give the readers further understanding of the semiotic approach in foreign language teaching and learning.

As it has been mentioned before, there are three types of signs: symbol, icon and index. A symbol is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional-so that the relationship must be learned (numbers, national flags, particular languages, Morse code etc.). Icon is a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (cartoon, portrait, imitative gestures, etc.). As Chandler (2002) argues, index is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrarily, but directly connected to the signified (as in the relation between fire and smoke). One basic principle of educational semiotics is that the teacher should have a heightened awareness of these signs and develop materials and strategies for the teaching environment. When the learning materials are visualized with respect to the relations among signs, the results may become more promising in that more senses are activated in the learning process and learning also emerges at sub-conscious level.

Particular attention should be given to iconicity when learning is considered. Considering an icon, the close relation between the signifier and signified helps students understand the content better. According to Danesi (as cited in Ponzio, 2002) “all types of learning in human development, as results in childhood, are a modeling process which may be described as a flow from iconicity to cultural symbolism”(p. 301). There seems to be no reason to neglect this natural learning flow when we consider the fact that in all types of learning (also in native language acquisition), icons play a vital role which may be a positive contribution if foreign language learning is considered. In ELT classes, the teacher’s use of imitative gestures or pictures in relation to target culture would obviously help students bridge the gap between their native culture and the target culture; therefore between the native language and foreign language. When these icons (the cultural signs of the foreign language) are combined with the presented content and the target language skill to be improved, this will obviously accelerate the foreign language awareness of the student both at conscious and sub-conscious levels. To illustrate, if the foreign language teacher uses an imitative gesture of a famous American figure or if he/she uses a symbolic picture of the target society while teaching a particular point, the students’ attention on the foreign language content and its culture will be heightened.

Particular attention to signs of the society is not solely adequate in educational semiotics, since comprehension of a sign is dependent upon the context of a particular code. Cunningham (2005) asserts that teachers should construct materials which will heighten their students’ awareness of the cultural context and the cultural codes of the society. These semiotic codes are namely;

- social codes (verbal language, behavioral codes etc.)
- textual codes (scientific codes, mass-media codes etc.), and
- interpretative codes (perceptual codes and ideological codes).

Each sign is meaningful in a particular code or sub-code. Educational semiotics is in great extent interested in the way how different semiotic codes are reflected in cultures and the ways in teaching these or using them in presenting a content. Accordingly, ELT practitioners should look for the ways to adapt the semiotic codes of the target culture combined with semiotic signs in the curriculum. So, consideration of non-linguistic messages in teaching English is obviously a beneficial trend, which is also stressed by Curry (1999) as “although the focus of English language instruction generally points learners to language and less to images and sounds..., it is important to consider how non-linguistic messages produce cultural meanings”(p. 30).

The process of making inference is also of great importance for educational semiotics. The types of inference are induction, deduction and abduction. It would be appropriate to clarify the terms with a semiotic perspective as put forward by Cunningham (2002, p. 20) as “Semiosis is a process of applying signs to understand some phenomena (induction), reasoning from sign to sign (deduction) and/or inventing signs to make sense of new experience (abduction)”.

Educational semiotics stresses the process of abduction as a type of inference in classroom settings. This approach to making inference may be used in education when making sense of new experience (in this context, introducing foreign culture behavior). At this point, Cunningham (1992, p.191) asserts that “teaching methods that encourage the creation of genuine doubt and promote abductive modes of inquiry should be emphasized”. In ELT settings, comparative cultural examples from the target culture and native culture may be introduced and the students may be asked to reason the contrasting cultural behaviors within a process of abduction. In this way, a bridge from known to unknown is constructed, which is an efficient technique in any form of learning.

Educational semiotics also draws insights from kinesics, which is “the systematic study of the communicational aspects of body motion” (Hayes, 1972, p.158). Before introducing the contributions of kinesics to educational semiotics (and to ELT), it would be appropriate to give some principles of kinesics:

- No body movement of expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears
- Body posture, movement and facial expression are subject to systematic analysis
- The systematic body motion of the members of a community is considered a function of the social system to which the group belongs
- Visible body activity has an investigable communicative function (Hayes, 1972, p.159)

The body, as a non-verbal communication tool, does not only communicate messages by accompanying the verbal utterances, but also is a free communication device in continuing the interaction. It is the case that the body language is culture driven and the signs that can be analyzed in this para-linguistic element are arbitrary, conventional and culture-oriented. Educational semiotics is interested in the variations of the use of body in communication and tries to reveal cross-cultural comparisons which may be applicable in classroom settings. Specifically in ELT, these cultural differences and comparisons which shape the linguistic message should be introduced by the teacher. According to Sapon (cited in Hayes, 1972) “There is one aspect of kinesics that we should make explicit in all our language classrooms; and this is the set of postures, gestures, grunting, and supporting noises that will make the foreign language speaker continue to emit so that we don’t represent blank stone walls to him”(p. 188). Here, it is emphasized that the use of these non-verbal elements helps the language learner in meaning making process and modifies the linguistic message. It may also be claimed that this type of learning may lead the particular information to be coded into the long-term memory of the learner. In concluding this part, Fantini’s (1997) words should be taken into consideration: “Language proficiency must be developed within the context of appropriate behaviors, determined by the norms of a specific culture” (p. 40).

Another subject to consider in educational semiotics is proxemics. According to Arias (1996) proxemics is the study of one’s perception and use of space and is one of the most important aspects of non-verbal communication. The teacher’s contact to students or his/her proximity level to them is an important point in classroom instruction. As each culture has different proximal zones in communication, the teacher’s respect or violation of these zones may either strengthen the communication process or damage it by building psychological barriers to learners mind. To clarify this, Fantini’s (1997, p.193) examples may be used as “if you ask to an Indian student ‘How do you do?’ very closely by looking in the eye, he is insulted” or “if you stand or sit very close to an American, he will be irritated”. Considering ELT settings, a teacher should be aware of and apply proximal rules of the English culture, and should teach his students about these while presenting the content. It should always be kept in mind that these para-linguistic nuances deeply affect the communicative skills of a language learner. This is one of the basic principles of educational semiotics, and the case is stressed by Ponzio (2002, p.308) in claiming that “the semiotic approach to education,..., is indispensable for an appropriate foresight of the ‘zones of proximal development’ of each particular learner”.

4. DISCUSSION

Although semiotic approach in education has many advantages and benefits, it is open to theoretical criticism. As it was mentioned before, there is an ongoing process of interpreting signs and codes in educational settings where a semiotic approach is applied. However, the mismatching of the signs or misinterpretation may result with failure in learning. Driscoll (2005) states that constraints would be caused by mismatches in the signs understood and used by the learner and those present in the learning environment, learning task, and social context for learning, or those used by the teacher. It is obvious that the teacher has the most important role in keeping this kind of a constraint in classroom instruction at a minimum level. This requires a pre-performed contrastive analysis by the teacher, including comparative cultural analysis. In our case, when English language teaching is considered, this kind of a negative outcome may result in long-term problems in the proficiency level of the learner.

As it is the case in many social sciences, empiric evidence is not always easy to reach. This point leads to debates on validity and reliability of the application of semiotic approach to education. Cunningham (2002, p.19) states that “it appears to lack any contact with empirical agenda”. So it is obvious that further research is needed in educational semiotics and the use of semiotic approach in language teaching. Another question is raised by Cunningham (2005) as he states that the aspects of pedagogy for which the implications of semiotics is least clear is evaluation: testing and grading. Therefore, possible applications of evaluation in educational semiotics require further research and remains as a question mark.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout the paper, the contributions of semiotic approach to education and specifically to ELT were discussed. Following the points of discussion, it may be claimed that this neglected tool in foreign language education should be considered by teachers in order to develop the proficiency level of language learners by making them get acquainted with the semiotic signs and codes of the target culture. The point is clarified by Tseng (2002, p.11) as “competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also use language appropriate to particular contexts. Thus, successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language”.

It is an important point that the teachers should be able to integrate the semiotic signs and codes to their teaching strategies. The target language is shaped by the target culture itself, so transference of the cultural elements to language environment may have the impact of modifying the linguistic message positively. Teachers’ consideration of kinesics, proxemics, iconicity and cultural codes and signs within a semiotic perspective will obviously be very effective in this process. Furthermore, it can be understood with a close look to methodology that various language teaching techniques, methods and approaches like suggestopedia, total physical response, silent way, NLP, communicative approach etc. have made use of semiotic principles, though not explicitly. Accordingly, attempts to use the signs should be built upon a conscious ground in order to reach foreign language learning and teaching goals, which accept the target culture as an indispensable part of the target language.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT (Uzun İngilizce Özet)

The consideration of semiotic theories in foreign language education has recently gained a significant importance and led to the emergence of a new field of study called educational semiotics. The particular purpose of this article is to introduce and discuss the insights of semiotics (with reference to educational semiotics) and to build a bridge to foreign language teaching.

In the present study, the contributions of semiotics to foreign language education- specifically to ELT- are discussed and the ways how semiotic approach to pedagogy leads to betterment in language learning process are handled comprehensively. This particular aim takes the paper to be more than a literature review on educational semiotics, but a step towards the consideration of semiotics in ELT settings and to the consideration of semiotic approach in EFL classes in Turkey and all over the world with great emphasis on the significance of teaching target culture.

In order to provide the reader with leading trends in semiotics, central European and American perspectives are introduced in the study at first hand. There are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and these two figures depart in handling the basic concept of semiotics, the sign, with two different perspectives; the former as ‘signs as a part of social life’ and the latter as ‘formal doctrine of signs related to logic’ (Chandler, 2002).

The inspiration for using semiotics in foreign language education is basically related with the undeniable fact that culture plays a vital role in language learning environments. Since a particular culture is interwoven with the social signs and social codes, educational settings are inevitably shaped by these cultural considerations. When the awareness of these social codes and signs are heightened in the learning environment, it would have promising results on the part of the learner. The case is more important if foreign language learning is considered due to the fact that a foreign language is the product of a foreign culture and accordingly subject to different social codes and social signs, which the students and teachers should be aware of.

It must be kept in mind that the particular attention to signs of the society is not solely adequate in educational semiotics, since comprehension of a sign is dependent upon the context of a particular code. Cunningham (2005) asserts that teachers should construct materials which will heighten their students’ awareness of the cultural context, the cultural codes of the society. The semiotic codes are namely; social codes (verbal language, behavioral codes etc.), textual codes (scientific codes, mass-media codes etc.), and interpretative codes (perceptual codes and ideological codes). Each sign is meaningful in a particular code or sub-code. Educational semiotics is in great extent interested in the way how different semiotic codes are reflected in cultures and the ways in teaching these or using them in presenting a content. Accordingly, ELT practitioners should look for the ways to adopt the semiotic codes of the target culture combined with semiotic signs in the curriculum. So, consideration of non-linguistic messages in teaching English is obviously a beneficial trend, which is also stressed by Curry (1999, p.30) as “although the focus of English language instruction generally points learners to language and less to images and sounds..., it is important to consider how non-linguistic messages produce cultural meanings.”

It can be concluded that foreign language teachers should integrate the semiotic signs and codes to their teaching applications. The target language is shaped by the target culture itself, so transference of the cultural elements to language environment may have the impact of modifying the linguistic message in a positive and beneficial manner. Teachers’ consideration of kinesics, proxemics, iconicity and cultural codes and signs with a semiotic perspective is obviously very effective in this process. Furthermore, it can be understood from the history of FLT methodology that various language teaching techniques, methods and approaches like total physical response, suggestopedia, silent way, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), communicative approach etc. have made use of semiotic principles, though not explicitly. Accordingly, attempts to use signs should be a conscious process in order to reach learner-centred teaching goals.