

**Towards Individual Centered Foreign Language Teaching**

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**Abstract**

The never ceasing and rapid evolution in foreign language teaching (FLT) methodology and its alliance with new fields of thought and recent significant educational tenets obligate a new central change. The learner centered teaching mode which was the compulsory alternative of the teacher centered FLT has made vital contributions to the field. Individualization is hardly a new concept now. Nevertheless, in actual teaching the learner centered mode has been to a great extent perceived as class centered or group centered teaching that does not deliberately concentrate on the individual learner. The recent educational theories about intelligence profiles of learners necessitate a new change of focus. Today, the personal realm of every single learner in the class should be valued more than ever in order to personalize FLT for more efficient, individual friendly learning. Individuals' emotions, personal beliefs, and talents are important considerations. Every learner should feel that she or he is in the center of the foreign language learning tasks performed in and out of the classroom. This instructional dimension which is still being dealt quite inconclusively in terms of application should be entitled as "individual centered foreign language teaching."

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Teaching, Learner Centered Teaching, Individual Centered Teaching, Cognitivism, Constructivism, Personalizing Foreign Language Learning, Foreign Language Teaching Methods, Group Centered Foreign Language Teaching, Lesson Plan

**Özet**

Yabancı dil öğretimindeki durmak bilmeyen yöntembilimsel evrim süreci ve diğer ilgili disiplinlerdeki gelişmeler artık yeni bir odak değişikliğini gerektirmektedir. Öğretmen merkezli öğretimin alternatifi olan öğrenci merkezli öğretim alana önemli katkılar yapmıştır. Bireyselleşme artık yeni bir kavram değildir. Oysa ki öğrenci merkezli eğitim büyük ölçüde bireye odaklanmayan sınıf veya grup merkezli eğitim

olarak algılanmaktadır. Bilişsel alandaki son gelişmeler bir odaklanma değişikliğini gerektirmektedir. Öğrenimi bireyselleştirmek için öğrencinin kişisel gerçekleri artık her zamankinden çok ilgi görmelidir. Her yabancı dil öğrencisi kendini sınıf içinde ve dışındaki etkinliklerin merkezinde hissetmelidir. Uygulama anlamında henüz belirgin olarak tartışılmamış olan bu konu “bireysel merkezli yabancı dil öğrenimi” olarak anılmalıdır. Kısaca, yabancı dil öğretiminde sınıftaki her öğrencinin kişisel özelliklerini dikkate almak anlamındaki bireyselleşme artık yeni bir kavram değildir. Bu alanda ve bu alanı etkileyen diğer disiplinlerdeki birey ile ilgili oluşan yeni algılamalar ışığında artık klasik öğrenci merkezli yabancı dil öğretimi kavramı yetersiz kalmakta ve yeniden tanımlanması gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Yabancı Dil Öğretimi, Öğrenci Merkezli Öğretim, Bireysel Merkezli Öğretim, Bilişsel Yaklaşım, Oluşturmacı Yaklaşım, Yabancı Dil Öğrenimini Bireyselleştirme, Yabancı Dil Öğretim Yöntemleri, Gurup Merkezli Yabancı Dil Öğretimi, Ders Planı

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a social instrument used by individuals. It is empowered and operated by the speakers for an endless list of functions meaningful in social situations of varied complexity. Millions of people also need to learn and speak foreign languages in order to cope with boundless global interaction. A striking number of FLT approaches and methods have been developed in order to meet the immense demand all over the world. There have always been new teaching methods with new perspectives which aim to perfect instruction. The continuous methodological upgrading process is a very sophisticated and success-oriented course of evolution. Distinctive approaches and methods often offer fundamental changes and new collections of teaching techniques appear. Various features that affect teaching undergo minor and major modifications during methodological improvement.

Today, dedication to a single method is often approached with skepticism. Eclecticism is a reality and new instructional profiles are created for different groups of learners depending on needs analysis and other criteria. Eclecticism can be seen as a solution for blind adherence to one method when further methodological sophistication is needed in teaching. Eclecticism has gained more importance today due to the instructional movements respecting and implementing individualization in the classroom which contribute to the formation of more social and interactive classes. It is

one of the perspectives to be considered in instructional design which recognizes mixed intelligence classes.

## **2. THE CENTRAL SHIFT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

The strong methodological currents had moved the intensity of FLT from the teacher to the learner. This big shift which occurred as a result of the discussion about “the center” of instruction supported by a justified literary propaganda was considered among the most radical improvements in the field. Upon the strong impact of the sloganistic nature of this new paradigm, the approaches had been criticized according to whether they were labeled as teacher centered or learner centered. Briefly, the learners rather than the teachers had to be more active in the classroom in processing the knowledge. This consequential central change attempted to place the learners in the active zone of foreign language lessons with increasing freedom and autonomy. The learners’ energy had to be released. The needs of the learner groups were taken into account. The materials evolved accordingly. Teachers were asked to have a low profile in the class. The learners had to elicit the rules and guess the meanings of the new vocabulary. Learners were no more passive participants exposed to mechanical teaching. All these consequential visional changes have contributed to the booming role of the individual learner as the foreign language operator.

### **2.1 THE CONSEQUENT CHANGE IN THE NEAR FUTURE**

The progress, reviewed above, which is the result of the essential change occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century is now coming to a new threshold. A probable transition of this sort should be assessed carefully and the field of foreign language teaching has to contemplate the consequential acculturation that will occur.

The following questions derived from the points brought up above may make this examination and the subsequent criticism easier to organize.

- 1- Is FLT definitely learner centered now?
- 2- Has the term “learner centered” been widely rationalized as learner centered or group centered?
- 3- Should the term “individual centered” replace the term “learner centered” in the Twenty-first century as a result of the shift discussed here?

This paper attempts to briefly analyze the rationale for this central shift in FLT

and anticipate the plausible change. The future of this transition must be better foreseen considering many trends in education and educational administration. A direct refusal of this discussion claiming that this is an unimportant terminological point would be an underestimation of the reflections of the new developments in relevant disciplines which affect FLT.

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### **3. INTERDISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS**

Total quality management (TQM) has blown a strong wind which forces FLT professionals to definitely consider every individual learner in order to devise better functioning and learning classes. Consequently, when every learner is subjectively considered, her/his emotional intelligence (EI) should be taken into account. Considering EI requires a motivational perspective that goes beyond needs and likes or dislikes of the learner. The learner must be aware of the activated status of his personal capacity and locate her/his place in the whole process of language learning. This self recognition will bring out further discrimination of learners' personal dimensions involving intelligence and learning some of which are labeled and described in details in multiple intelligences (MI) theory. A pragmatic survey for the domains of intelligence that are high in the class may help foreign language learners and the teachers understand and evaluate individual talents, aptitudes and strengths.

### **4. THE DISCUSSION**

The FLT trends developed in the second half of the twentieth century raised the issue of being learner centered. Nevertheless, in the actual application it was generally regarded as class centered or group centered. In the beginning, the activities such as answering questions individually instead of answering them in chorus, or having limited and controlled dialogs about a given topic and eliciting the grammar rules were among the early attempts to create communication and encourage cognitive development in the class before the communicative era. Now, from a distance of time they may be considered as the initial steps to individualize language learning. In the following few decades, a vast collection of interactive language teaching techniques and activity types accumulated. Such a richness ended up in more learner centered teaching environments. The discussions about learner strategies and learner profile were the indication of the importance attached to the learners. Individual learners had to be aware of their strategies and had to discover new or improved ways to make their

foreign language learning attempts more enjoyable, effective and personal. Today, developing instruction requires even a broader range of instructional procedures which necessitate a detailed understanding of the learner's personality and a closer and continuous observation of his work and progress.

## **5. PROPOSALS**

The discussion above attempts to support the proposition that the term 'learner centered' needs to be substituted by the term "individual centered" in order to focus on more detailed identification of the learner profiles so as to reach every individual learner in the class. Whole class consideration without truly taking every individual into account is risky in terms of total quality of learning since students in a class are different and may reveal different talents. The 'center' of teaching should be shifted from the whole class to each individual learner in order to increase foreign language acquisition in the class. The ultimate details and scope of individualizing foreign language instruction may become more visible when the reflections of new schools of thought which unquestionably value the individuals' talents and the developments about describing intelligence profiles of individual learners are widely perceived and considered in the foreign language classroom.

The tendency towards creating more natural and individual centered FLT approaches and programs which attempt to derive some principles from native language acquisition theories brings foreign language acquisition (FLA) into foreground. Despite the skepticism against, FLA is a new, rarely discussed, hard to believe but engaging teaching trend. Full acquisition may still be seen as a future concern in classes today due to limited accumulation. For this reason the transition to FLA may be initially launched by employing near acquisition strategies to be devised in the near future. It is, without a doubt, more complicated than FLT in terms of creating the resources and environment required. Building an acquisition environment, creating and planning the period of time required for exposure to the target language, and making authentic materials available need a program design with a broader scope particularly in the countries where the target language is a foreign language. Once it is maintained, the acquisition environment may offer individuals a more realistic atmosphere to use the target language in real-like manner. The term individual centered may better define the role of individual learners and better symbolize the new focus of the foreign language

acquisition and instruction in the twenty-first century. It cannot be assumed that individualization is a new concept. There has been considerable amount of literature accumulating to support the movement in FLT towards learner autonomy in the FLT world to truly individualize learning. Nevertheless, it still requires serious organization and development.

## **7. VIEWS**

There is significant literature emphasizing the rationale for further personalization of foreign language instruction. These discussions focus on the new routes to be considered in the field. McGroarty (1998) states that constructivist approaches challenge applied linguists to reconsider their theories in three areas: 1) the multiple identities of language users 2) the identification of optimal environments for language acquisition 3) the institutional constraints affecting language acquisition and instruction. She believes that many answers in applied linguistics can be found in the subjective and social dimensions of language learning. The interrelationships between the individual and group psychosocial, cognitive, and linguistic aspects of language acquisition and teaching, and the opportunities and constraints of social contexts surrounding language acquisition and development should be described by better means in order to enhance learning and instruction.

Human beings display different talents. Introducing this fact about human capacities Gardner (1993) defines IQ as a one-dimensional approach to assess people's minds and calls the corresponding view of teaching "the uniform school." His theory of multiple intelligences focuses on the increasing number of domains which explore separate human capacities. He discusses that the purpose of school is to develop intelligences and make it easier for people to reach professional and nonprofessional aims that are suitable to their particular range of intelligences. Learner beliefs are important factors affecting individuals during language learning. Yoshiko (1999) discusses that learner beliefs cannot be simplified into one dimension. They affect learning uniquely due to the multiple, autonomous dimensions they possess. Their interpretable dimensions must be detected, independence of the identified dimensions has to be confirmed, and the effects of each belief factor on language learning should be explored.

In order to cope with the new learning standards and the demands of today's complex societies, we need to develop teaching that goes far beyond dispensing information, giving tests, and grading. Teachers should understand how to teach in ways that respond to diverse learning approaches of the students. It is also important for schools how to support teaching and learning of this sort (Darling-Hammond 1996b:7 cited in Day 1999:70). Griffiths and Ethane (2000:1) discuss the importance of personalizing language learning by integrating feelings, opinions, and experiences of individual learners into lessons. The addition of this personal dimension makes learners feel that their personalities and own world are important and valued. Such an approach fosters the personal involvement which is very often failed to achieve by textbooks which are the core material for most classrooms. Revel And Norman (1999) offer NLP based activities in order to focus on personal profile, what learners want, individuality and differences, and language learning in a multidimensional context. It is important to focus on the strengths and capacity of the individuals to make them feel that they can learn better.

Constructivism argues that all people construct their own interpretation of truth, for this reason multiple dissimilar ways of knowing and describing are equally valid (Brown 2000:11). Breen and Littlejohn (2000) discuss the need for creating structures which will enable learners to have a say in the management of their own language learning. The disclosure of learners' opinions about learning may increase the efficiency of the classroom applications in a democratic way. Despite the rareness of literature for the present, negotiation and process syllabuses focus on exercising shared decision making in the classroom. Negotiation can be classified into three types; personal, interactive, and procedural which are all related and can co-occur. A process syllabus attempts to highlight the classroom decisions open to negotiation. In other words, it provides a decision-making framework for developing the curriculum of a group of learners by offering the matrix of decisions suitable for negotiation.

The energy generated by individuals working together is called synergy. Joyce et al (1997:28) discuss that constructing learning communities to exercise social models of teaching requires classroom management that can develop cooperative interaction in the classroom. Such models of teaching help learners find ways to sharpen their own cognitions through peer interaction. They help learners work productively with other

people who have different personalities and participate in a work group as a productive member. Morgan and Morris (1999:136) report as a result of their research that, given the required resources, only the people on the front-line; teachers and learners can together enhance the quality of teaching and learning as discussed in TQM. Williams (1998) points out the importance of teaching thinking through a foreign language in foreign language acquisition. Thinking in a different medium can be a real reason for practicing the target language besides developing the language itself. The sub-skills included in critical thinking and problem solving are crucial for learners' knowledge of the world in general and constitute a valuable base for foreign language tasks.

## **8. TAKING ACTION**

The transition to individual centered foreign language teaching requires the approval of the rationale for such a mutation and dedication to realize the necessary methodological alterations. Modifications may be better illustrated with the arguments presented below.

### **8.1 VISION**

The initial step for personalizing foreign language learning is the alteration to be created in the course designers' and teachers' vision. They should absolutely see the class as a group composed of individual learners who may react teaching differently due to the personal reflections which form one's behavioral patterns in the class. The language behavior is the part of the iceberg that can be observed during very conventional lessons. There is much to reveal when the learner engages in the lesson personally with full involvement by displaying his or her own world. The diversity in the group due to these personal traits should never be considered as a negative determinant which may raise disorder in the group. It is a socially rich mixture or variation that makes a class "a model society" which is the most essential setting for facilitating target language use. Such a group may have different personal themes to reveal using the target language, unique personal approaches to events created to socialize, and unlike language behaviors. This heterogeneity should be wholly welcomed and handled in the same way language behaviors of native speakers are handled in real life. The classical schooling expects learners to adapt themselves to the standard teaching which may not always be flexible enough to consider individual capacities. The state of automation in teaching of this sort does not comply with the



present methodological achievements of the field of applied linguistics.

## **8.2 OVERALL PLANNING**

Foreign language instruction labeled as individual centered requires specific planning from the very beginning to the last year of attendance in order to create socially expressive and demonstrative learners with cross-curricular support whenever possible. The reserved learners who will follow such programs should be made aware of their individuality not only in foreign language lessons but in all other subjects through close pedagogical concern from the teaching staff as well. Such programs may not be easy to carry out with undemonstrative learners accustomed to teacher centered schooling or exposed to extremely authoritarian social environments. From this cause, this is a cross-curricular matter as well which subject teachers need outer support to improve the outcome. In this respect, making FLT individual centered requires whole-school help and parental involvement. Substantial individual centered teaching may be a widespread approach in the future but for the present it is a teaching trend that requires further exploration and new resources. For the time being this fact may make the program development and implementation an over-demanding task. It requires more attention, time and practice to thrive. From methodological perspective, it is not utopian for foreign language teachers to shift into actual individual centered teaching since the field of applied linguistics has already been discussing many relevant topics such as communicative language teaching, humanistic approach, cognitivism, constructivism, learner strategies, personal construct, brain based learning, discovery learning, and hands on learning for a considerable length of time.

## **8.3 ALWAYS IN THE CENTER**

The existing language teaching programs which are already communicative in nature may need further modification by adding more personal dimensions to the planning and practice. The underlying principle is that every individual learner may be different from other learners but she/he still should remain in the center of teaching. This can be done by assigning roles to learners in real-like social settings created in and out of the class. The authenticity of the social interaction created in the class and other settings may directly affect participants' enthusiasm. Changing personal roles may keep the individuals always in the center of the tasks altogether as very active contributors.

At the beginning of the era called “learner centered” it could take learners a long time to wait for their turns to answer the questions. Student participation in class discussions especially in large classes could be a chaotic challenge. It became easier to handle large groups learning foreign languages through pair work and group work. Task based learning supported learners with orderly guidelines for complicated language activities where they could be more active. These achievements were at the same time the initial attempts to individualize learning. As such numerous accomplishments indicate and the transitional continuum implies, the individual centered foreign language teaching may be seen as the new stage in the progress that started with teacher centered teaching and shifted to learner centered teaching which was, in the main, mostly class centered as argued above. The syllabus required for the sort of teaching suggested here should definitely be eclectic including cognitive, humanistic, and constructivist perspectives. Since there are unknown parts to be constructed by individual learners together in conversational interchange, syllabuses for each grade must offer the flexibility and personal space for individual expression and positive deviation. Authentic speech events in and outside the class which are more appealing and tempting may be devised in this way.

#### **8.4 LESSON PLANS**

Individual centered FLT requires a radical change in lesson plans. Mixed intelligence classes are a reality like mixed ability classes which have been discussed for a long time. For this reason, devising language activities that match the growing range of descriptions of intelligences many of which are included in MI theory would be an ideal individual centered approach for FLT. Teachers should absolutely bear in mind whether their presentation and the class work, in other words ‘the lesson profile’ match the ‘intelligence profile’ of the class. Consideration of the manner of differentiation discussed in MI theory is closely related with many issues such as learners’ cognitive input, intake and output during the lesson, power relationship in the class, students’ development of self image and learning capacity (Sarigöz, 2003). In this vein, lesson plans should take into account the discrimination of the domains of intelligence in MI theory and reflections from other theories about cognitive differences as well as improving cognitive capacity.

## **8.5 LEARNER RECOGNITION**

Learner recognition is an unavoidable component of program design to nurture individual foreign language instruction. In order to activate each and every individual in the class, the teachers have to discriminate their capacities. Seeing them as individuals in the class, not only as a whole class of learners requires a new plan that may be systematized initially by implementing personal learning-profile surveys at different levels of complexity which may be devised by teachers for their own classes. This may give them a better view and sense of the group and class-events and help them constitute a system of learner profile data which will even be used by future instructors who will have access to students' portfolios in the following academic programs.

## **8.6 ACTUAL TEACHING**

Foreign language lessons planned to readily welcome mixed intelligence groups and handle such multiplicity are the real learner centered ones which must be labeled today as 'individual centered' to strongly mark the reassessment discussed here. The individual centered FLT approach should normally be understood as the advanced form of the learner centered trend. As for the real learning, there is no magical formula in the foreign language class, every learner must realize that his role in the activity is a central one since without his performance and personal contribution the tasks cannot be accomplished. Learners should be ready to take part in always-different activities, ones which appeal to all intelligence types as well as the ritual ones. Not only their suggestions about the syllabus but their on-site propositions about the activities as well should definitely be welcomed to ensure that no personal contribution that has not been invited, revealed, or encouraged during the lesson is lost. The collection of activities in a unit must attempt to take into account many capacities including musical, natural, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, linguistic, personal, interpersonal, and logical-mathematical domains of intelligence. The individual centered foreign language instruction must never ignore revealing the unknown in a speech event which is generally narrowly defined as information gap. Conversational interchange of this sort must follow or replace the automatic practice of conventional communicative patterns at higher levels of proficiency.

There may not be one-to-one correspondence between two different classes studying the same unit. Learners are often encouraged to take independent decisions in

discovery oriented, communicative tasks. This may cause sudden changes in daily plans and expectations. Deviations that emerge during the lesson from what has been planned may be a controversial issue. Nevertheless it is a classroom reality. Different routes, taken to the same end which encourage student self-confidence, that foster personalizing target language use should be handled as a positive learning experience. Deviation management can be learned and developed by the instructors. (Sarigöz 2000)

## **9. CONCLUSION**

The significant trends in different educational and managerial disciplines that influence the field of teaching powerfully support foreign language teaching professionals to consider individual profile of each learner in the group. TQM reminds that teaching systems work better if every individual is considered and is willing to participate. Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) highlights the importance of empathy, harmony and how to use language to develop human thinking for better interaction. Arguments about EI make individuals aware of their capacity and learning power through self recognition. MI theory helps individuals differentiate domains of intelligence they are high in and find out their personal intelligence profiles. Contributive tenets like the above must be carefully thought about by the FLT professionals and definitely used in teaching.

Foreign language teaching, to conclude, supported by the resourceful trends in education and its own field-specific achievements, may consider a new central shift now. The term ‘learner centered’ has been a correct label nevertheless the corresponding actual classroom has not been totally so as discussed elsewhere. The recent schools of thought and the current foreign language teaching trends value each learner’s own world and focus on revealing the potential to be used when their unrevealed but creative ideas correlating desired language behaviors in the lesson are disclosed. The topics such as individual learner, constructivism, and negotiated syllabus display an emphatic approach to instruction by highlighting democratic ideals of teaching. This is entirely sensible when we think about the learners who cannot be very successful in foreign language classes just because they are personally different from other learners or cannot cope with inflexible teaching which offers rigid programs. The issue of ‘center’ is definitely a matter of building the sophisticated communication environment in the classroom considering intellectual capacity and the personal worlds of the individuals and being able to socialize them through authentic language use.

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