

Fadi Abughoush
Brittany Kam
Lindblom Math & Science Academy

Student-Centered and Communicative Learning
In the Arabic Language Classroom

Introduction:

The approach for teaching in many Arabic and foreign language classrooms is based on the Teacher-Centered Classroom Model; however, research shows that students benefit more from a Student-Centered Classroom. Student-centered learning is driven by the students. This allows students the freedom of discovery, enhances their retention, and improves engagement and behavior. In this essay, we will be discussing the benefits of implementing a Student-Centered Model in the Arabic and foreign language classroom.

The teacher as the central figure in the classroom--also known as the Atlas Complex, named aptly after the titan Atlas, who was condemned to hold up the sky for eternity(Finkel, 1983)--assumes full responsibility, supplies all motivation, insight and expectations. In exchange, their students offer almost nothing. This type of learning only allows for a small portion of input from the students on the task. The teacher will stand in front of the class and give lectures. Therefore, the teacher is viewed as the ultimate authority and center of knowledge in the classroom. Students are often seen as empty vessels where the teacher will impart their knowledge on the students and the students will absorb the information through passive learning. There is little room for cooperative learning in this environment, thus, students have only a few opportunities to learn and interact with their peers.

In a student-centered environment, there is little need for input and output from the teacher. The students will get many opportunities to practice speaking and writing using games and other speaking activities. A student-centered classroom motivates students to do the work. The content of the material is related to the students' lives allowing for students to pull their own experiences and knowledge in developing their language proficiency. Through providing students with opportunities to connect to the material, students feel a more personal connection to their learning and take ownership for the work. Also, in the student-centered classroom, there will be no need for planning to meet the needs of different learning styles as this can be utilized through the personalization of learning.

Methods

Blaine Ray, a proponent of Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), says the key to engaging students with the content is to bring the content into their realms of interest. In the 21st century classroom, students are continuously connected to technology. Today's learners are multi-taskers and are likely to become impatient when they are put in a situation where they are required to focus on a single prescribed topic or source. Learners are able to obtain information instantly, which can be a catalyst for learning but also contributes to a short attention span. Learners are naturally curious and if you are able to peak their interest, they will be motivated to learn. They desire instant gratification, constant stimulus, and change but are not accustomed to waiting for results. The student-centered classroom can provide this environment because students are engaged in authentic task and built around discovery and problem-solving.

Dr. Spencer Kagan, a world renowned author and keynote speaker in the field of education and psychology, developed the Kagan Cooperative Learning Approach, which lends itself well to a student-centered classroom. Language acquisition is fostered by input that is comprehensible, developmentally appropriate, redundant, and accurate (Kagan, 1995). This method encourages interaction among students by placing them into heterogeneous groups of varying skill level. In this small group setting, the students are able to both produce output and provide input at the level appropriate to negotiate meaning. Input must be comprehensible to facilitate language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

Conclusion:

It is our goal for teachers to learn how to effectively implement the Student-Centered approach in their classroom. This includes negotiating meaning, and developing strategies. We will discuss how to use these techniques effectively through sharing activities, strategies and games. Additionally, there should be built-in time for exploration of interests, facilitation of inquiry, and collaboration among peers. There should be a choice in how students meet the unit goals, objectives, and ongoing feedback as the students work towards proficiency. Teachers must foster a connection to learning as students learn to take ownership in the classroom. These methods will improve student proficiency, engagement and behavior and will motivate a number of students to go beyond the classroom and become lifelong learners.

References:

1. Finkel, D. L. and Monk, G. S. (1983), Teachers and learning groups: Dissolution of the atlas complex. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1983: 83–97.
doi:10.1002/tl.37219831411

2. Krashen, S.D. (1982). "Principles and practice in second language acquisition." Oxford, England: Pergamon
3. Kagan, S. (1995). "We Can Talk: Cooperative Learning in the Elementary ESL Classroom" Washington DC: ERIC Digest