Chapter 1

A Learner–Centered Approach to Technology Integration: Online Geographical Tools in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates a model for technology integration in learner-centered classrooms for educators, administrators, and policy makers. In this model, students are trained on how to use a technological tool but then given freedom to choose how much and in what specific content area they use the tool. Three key aspects of learner-centered curriculum design are supported by this model: 1) delivering scaffolding strategies to help students become active and autonomous learners; 2) giving learners a role in shaping the curriculum, and 3) recognizing each learner’s diverse, unique background and learning style (American Psychological Association, 1997). The application of the model described here is rather narrow--training English as a Second Language (ESL) students to use online geographical tools (e.g., Google Earth) – but it can be adapted to suit a wide range of technological tools, subjects, and contexts.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims at demonstrating a model for technology integration in learner-centered classrooms for educators, administrators, and policy makers. Three key aspects of learner-centered curriculum design are supported by this model:

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1. Delivering scaffolding strategies to help students become active and autonomous learners;
2. Increasing motivation by giving learners a role in shaping the curriculum, and
3. Recognizing each learner’s diverse, unique background and learning style (American Psychological Association, 1997).

For the project described in this chapter, students were trained on how to use an online application as a tool for an oral presentation, but then given freedom to choose how much and in what specific context they use the tool. Students worked with a partner to use this tool to give an informative speech on a topic of their choosing to their peers. They were provided an in-class workshop and technological training materials they could access outside of class, as much or as little as needed. This model caters to learners’ varying comfort levels with technology and allows each group to become the class authority on the chosen topic, aligning with Nunan’s (1988) description of learner-centered curriculum as “a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught” (p. 2). The application of the model described here is rather narrow--training English as a second language (ESL) students to use an online geographical tool (e.g., Google Earth)--but it can be adapted to suit a wide range of technological applications, subjects, and contexts.

This chapter begins by examining the relationships between learner-centered approaches, technology integration, and ESL pedagogy, followed by demonstrating the protocol and innovative model for technology integration in learner-centered classrooms. Assessment tools for formative and summative methods will be introduced. Finally, implications for learner-centered pedagogy in higher education will be addressed.

SIGNIFICANCE, PERSPECTIVES, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Learner-centered teaching (LCT) has been an effective approach for provoking learners’ experiences in higher education (Weimer, 2002). An LCT approach demonstrates multiple teaching techniques, including interactive assignments, methods, feedback, and assessments that are very different from traditional classrooms. Five key differences are in:

1. The balance of power between teacher and student,
2. The function of content (e.g., memorizing facts versus actively constructing knowledge),
3. The role of the teacher from transmitter to facilitator,
4. The responsibility for learning shifting more towards students, and
5. Evaluation purposes and processes (Weimer, 2002).

Students are required to take on active learner roles and responsibilities beyond taking notes, listening passively to instructors’ lectures, and passing tests (Bishop, Caston, & King, 2014). The LCT approach is particularly well-suited to language teaching, where the current prevailing methodology—communicative language teaching—places a heavy emphasis on students actively developing language skills, rather than simply memorizing rules and vocabulary. According to Nunan (1988), “proponents