A PARADIGM SHIFT OF LEARNER-CENTERED TEACHING STYLE: REALITY OR ILLUSION?

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While learner-centered language teaching has been advocated in higher education in recent years, teacher-centered teaching styles may be still dominant in actual practice. Since previous studies have revealed conflicting results on the relations between variables such as gender, degree obtained, and course type, with the perceived teaching styles, this study also examines the correlation between these variables and the perceived teaching styles. Using Adapted Principles of Adult Learning Styles (APALS), the present study investigates the teaching style of instructors in a southwestern university. Seven factors in APALS are designed to assess participants' teaching styles: learner-centered activities, personalizing instruction, relating to experience, assessing student needs, climate building, participation in the learning process, and flexibility for personal development. Results show that most instructors still use traditional, teacher-centered styles in university settings despite the call for a paradigm shift to learner-centered ones. Among the seven factors, personalizing instruction and flexibility for personal development are the least practiced by university instructors. Reasons for the discrepancy between theory and practice as well as implications for teacher training are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Deriving from the constructivist view of learning, a "learner-centered approach" has been advocated in higher education during the last few decades (Zophy, 1982; McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Weimer, 2002; Pillay, 2002). However, learner-centeredness is an ambiguous concept. To understand learner-centered teaching, it is necessary to begin with the teacher-centered approach, which is closely related to the behaviorist tradition. It assumes that learners are passive and that they become active by reacting to stimuli in the environment. Therefore, the teacher's role is to create an environment which stimulates the desired behavior and discourages those that are believed to be undesirable. This role makes the teacher the focus of attention. By contrast, the learner-centered approach assumes that learners are active and have unlimited potential for individual development. The individual learner rather than the body of information is the focus of teaching. In the field of language teaching, Hart (2003) defines through constructivism the view that "language learners

should develop their understanding of the convention of language used by engaging in the kinds of language activity found in real life rather than by learning lists of rules" (p.288). In a broader sense of education, Kain (2003) explains that in learner-centered approaches, the construction of knowledge is shared, and learning is achieved through learners' engagement with various activities. The idea of focusing on the learner rather than the teacher requires that teachers' and learners' roles be reexamined in the learning process. Teachers need to consider a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered teaching style to a learner-centered one.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Conti (2004), the term teaching style refers to the distinct qualities displayed by a teacher that are consistent from situation to situation regardless of the material being taught. Based on the literature on teaching styles, Dupin-Bryant (2004) defines learner-centered teaching style as "a style of instruction that is responsive, collaborative, problem-centered, and democratic in which both students and the instructor decide how, what, and when learning occurs" (p.42). On the other hand, teacher-centered teaching style is considered as "a style of instruction that is formal, controlled, and autocratic in which the instructor directs how, what, and when students learn" (p.42). To assess teachers' teaching style, Conti (1979) developed in his doctoral dissertation the Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS). Since 1979, PALS has been revised several times (Conti, 1983, 1985, 2004). Tests on its construct validity, content validity and reliability proved PALS is a highly reliable and valid rating scale to examine instructors' teaching style (Conti 1979, 1982, 1983; Premont, 1989; Parisot, 1997).

PALS is a 44-item questionnaire requiring respondents to indicate the frequency with which they practice the behaviors described (0=Never, 5=Always). A higher score on PALS indicates a learner-centered approach, while a lower score indicates a teacher-centered one. Seven factors constitute the structure of the PALS assessment. They are as follows (Conti, 1985, p.11):

1. Learner-Centered Activities: Reflects the extent to which an instructor supports a more collaborative mode by practicing behaviors that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning; those who support a teacher-centered mode of instruction favor formal testing over informal evaluation techniques.
2. Personalizing Instruction: Reflects the extent to which instructors employ a number of techniques that personalize learning to meet the unique needs of each student, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition.

3. Relating to Experience: Reflects the extent to which an instructor emphasizes learning activities that consider prior experience and encourages students to make learning relevant to current experiences.
4. Assessing Student Needs: Assesses instructor orientation toward finding out what each student wants and needs to know, a task often accomplished through individual conferences and informal counseling.
5. Climate Building: Measures whether teachers set a friendly and favorable climate in the classroom, where dialogue and interaction with other students are encouraged. Taking risks is also favored, and errors are seen as part of the learning process.
6. Participation in the Learning Process: Reflects the extent to which an instructor relies on students to identify the problems they wish to solve and allows students to participate in making decisions about the topics that will be covered in class.
7. Flexibility for Personal Development: Reflects an instructor's self-conception as a facilitator rather than a provider of knowledge. Flexibility is maintained by adjusting the classroom environment and curricular content to meet the changing needs of the students.

Since Conti developed and validated PALS in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the instrument has been used in a myriad of research studies (e.g. Clow, 1986; Wilson, 1994; Miglietti & Strange, 1998; Wang, 2004). Results of these studies show a strong preference for the teacher-centered approach in community colleges and university settings, even though the learner-centered approach is advocated in the adult education literature. At the college level, teachers are trying to achieve teaching goals that are closely related to academic disciplines and personal perceptions of teaching roles. The teaching style is influenced by the nature of the learner, the teacher, the situation and the content of the curriculum (McCollin, 2000).

Although several studies implementing PALS have included specific demographic and personal variables such as gender, age, teaching area, and students, there is a dearth of research investigating the correlation between these variables and teaching styles. For example, Spoon and Schell (1998) investigated the interaction between student learning styles and instructor teaching styles. They also examined the influence of selected demographic variables including age, ethnicity, and gender on learning styles and found that age is a significant variable. But no analysis has been conducted on the interaction between demographic variables of teachers and their teaching styles. In Dupin-Bryant's (2004) descriptive study investigating the teaching styles of interactive television instructors, PALS scores were calculated in relation to various demographic variables such as gender, level of education, academic rank, interactive classroom type and course type. It was found that

the teaching style of interactive television instructors was teacher-centered. However, no further analysis was conducted.

A few studies investigating the relationship between instructors' teaching styles and instructor demographic variables reveal conflicting results. Seevers & Clark (1993) investigated 13 independent variables such as major, current professional position, number of years employed, highest educational degree, number of adult education classes taken, teaching experience outside of the present employment, gender, and age. It was found that none of the variables in the study were related to the others. As the study was only able to account for 16 percent of the total variance in explaining or predicting factors related to perceived teaching styles, additional studies should be conducted to look at different variables or combinations of variables to try to explain more of the variance. In contrast, McCollin (2000) found that there was a significant relationship between the instructors' teaching style and the predicator variables such as the instructors' educational level and the type of course they taught. The conflicting results warrant further investigation of the relationship between instructors' teaching styles and instructors' demographic variables.

Moreover, very few studies have been conducted to assess teaching style with instructors from different countries using PALS. In most universities in North America, there is a large portion of non-native instructors, who are teaching content courses or language courses. For those who teach language courses, they teach their first languages, such as Spanish, French, and Chinese. In this sense, they are regarded as native instructors. Those native speakers of English who teach languages other than English are nonnative instructors. Because instructors come from different cultural and educational backgrounds, their teaching styles may vary. And as the curricula of language courses differ drastically from those of content courses, it is reasonable to assume that teachers modify their teaching style based on the courses they teach.

The present study is a pilot study that investigates the teaching styles of instructors in a large southwestern university and the correlation between instructors' demographic characteristics and self-perceived teaching styles. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the dominant teaching style of the university instructors in the sample?
2. Among the seven factors indicated in PALS, which are easiest for instructors to achieve?
3. What variables influence instructors' teaching style?

METHODOLOGY

A survey was used to collect data among a group of Graduate Associates in Teaching (GATs) in a research-based university. All participants in this study were actual instructors of at least one course. Since it was a pilot

study, a semi-purposeful sampling technique was used to ensure that there was diversity in course types (language course vs. content course) and speakers status (native vs. non-native) among all participants. Twenty-four surveys were returned from the 28 surveys distributed. Of those surveys returned, 3 were discarded due to missing data. Thus 21 usable survey responses were analyzed.

The survey was a two-part questionnaire including a general demographic survey and the Adapted Principle of Adult Learning Scale (APALS) (See Appendix). In the APALS, the PALS was reduced to 26 items because a 44-item questionnaire is rather lengthy and it is necessary to exclude some items that are not proper in higher education settings for college students. For example, "I allow *older students* more time to complete assignments when they need it", "I encourage students to adopt *middle class values*".

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic characteristics of the participants. The instructor's overall teaching style was determined by a composite score calculated from each individual item results. An ANOVA analysis was used to determine the relationship of length of residence in US, length of teaching in home country, length of teaching in US and the total score in PALS. The above analysis is done with the help of SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Science) 12.0 for Windows.

RESULTS

Among the GAT instructors (N=21) participating in this study, 75 percent (n=16) were female and approximately one-fourth (n=5) were male. Sixty-seven percent (n=14) of them were teaching language courses ("LAN" in the following analysis) like English as a Second Language, French, Spanish, and Chinese. Thirty-three percent (n=7) were teaching content courses (CON) such as English composition, Linguistics and Computer Science. Native speaker teachers (e.g., Americans teaching English, French speakers teaching French) made up 57 percent (n=12) of the total population, and 43 percent were non-native speaker instructors. Ten percent (n=2) reported that their highest level of completed education was a doctorate, 38 percent (n=8) a bachelor's degree, and 52 percent (n=11) a master's degree.

Respondents' length of residence (LOR) in the US ranged from one to forty years, with a mean of 16, median of 8, and SD of 14. The length of teaching in their home country (LOT1) ranged from zero to ten years, with a mean of 3.5, median of 3, and standard deviation of 3.4. The length of teaching in the US (LOT2) ranged from one to ten years, with a mean of 3.0, median of 2, and standard deviation of 2.8. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Participants

Demographic Variables	Total N	Total %
Gender		
Female	16	76%
Male	5	24%
Age		
21-30	13	62%
31-40	8	38%
Level of education completed		
BA	8	38%
MA	11	52%
PhD	2	10%
Course type (lan/con)		
Language	14	67%
Content	7	33%
Nation		
Native	12	57%
Non-native	9	43%
Length of residence in US (LOR)	6	29%
<2	5	24%
3-16	7	33%
17-30	3	14%
>30		
Length of teaching in home country (LOT1)	11	52%
0- 3.5	7	33%
3.6-7	3	14.3%
>7		
Length of teaching in US (LOT2)	16	76%
0- 3	3	14%
4-7	2	10%
8-11		

Instructors' overall teaching styles were determined by the composite score on the PALS calculated from each individual item results. For the 26 items, the highest possible score was 130. The norms of these 26 items were established by Conti, who compared the 26 items in the original data set with 1130 cases, and recommended "using 83 as the norm with a standard deviation

of 13" (personal communication, Feburary 5, 2005). Although this norming value was derived through Conti's estimates of norm scores for the participants in the present study, the reliability of this modified APALS instrument cannot be directly equated to that of Conti's own instrument Nonetheless, this estimated norm was based upon careful consideration of participant variables found within the canonical APALS instrument and provides a powerful mean of comparison in the present study.

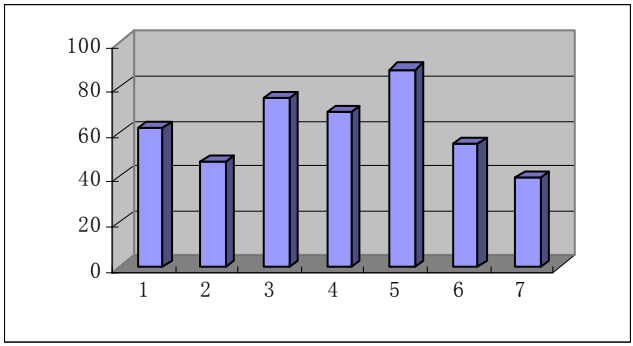
The number of standard deviations in which a score fell above or below the established mean of 83 was used to interpret the strength of commitment to a particular style: (a) extreme --- 3 standard deviations away from the mean; (b) very strong --- 2 standard deviations away from the mean, and (c) increased --- 1 standard deviation away from the mean (Conti, 2004). The mean APALS composite rating for the sample GATs in this study was 75.3 with a standard deviation of 6.6. Nineteen percent of the instructors (n = 4) had composite scores in the range of zero to 68 (two standard deviations below the norm). More than 60 percent (n = 13) scored within one standard deviation below the established mean, and another nineteen percent (n = 4) scored above the established mean (see Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency distribution of GATs' APALS scores

Degree of commitment	**Interval**	**Frequency**	**%**
Teacher-centered --- very strong	56 --- 68	4	19
Teacher-centered --- increased	69 --- 82	13	62
Learner-centered --- increased	83 --- 95	4	19

To answer the second research question, "Among the seven factors in PALS, which are easiest for instructors to achieve in the classroom?" the percentage of the mean score by each factor in its own total was calculated to determine the ease of achievement. The higher percentage the mean score is, the more easily it is for instructors to practice those classroom behaviors. Results indicated that Factor 5 (climate building) was the easiest (88%) with a mean of 8.8 out of a total of 10, and Factor 7 (flexibility for personal development) was the hardest (40%) with a mean of 10.1 out of a total of 25 (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of mean score by factor.



1=Learner-Centered Activities; 2=Personalizing Instruction; 3=Relating to Experience;
4= Assessing Needs; 5=Climate Building; 6=Learning Process; 7= Flexibility for Pers. Develop.

Previous studies have shown that demographic variables such as nation, sex and age influence teachers' teaching styles. However, few studies consider course types as a possible variable. This study, including it as a possible factor, analyzed correlation between those variables and instructors' teaching styles. The descriptive data are displayed in Table 3:

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of selected demographic variables

Categories	Mean	Std. Deviation
native	75.73	6.55
nonnative	74.63	7.14
female	74.59	6.22
male	77.60	8.11
language	75.79	5.93
content	74.36	8.28
Total	75.31	6.62

The ANOVA analysis showed that no significant difference in total score resulted from instructor sex ($F(1,21)=2.325$, $p>.05$), native/nonnative characteristics ($F(1,21)=0.017$, $p>.05$), degree type ($F(2, 21)=0.68$, $p>.05$), age ($F(1, 21)=1.444$; $p>.05$) or language/content characteristics ($F(1,21)=0.306$, $p>.05$). There was no interaction among these factors.

Further analysis of the variables showed that length of teaching in the US and course type are the best predictors of an instructor's total scores of the APALS ($F(2, 20) = 9.09$, $p<.05$, $R^2 = .50$). The longer the teachers teach, the higher their total score is (Higher scores indicate that their teaching style

moves more towards student-centeredness). With the same length of teaching in the US, language instructors scored about 6 points higher than content instructors.

DISCUSSION

The findings allow us to address the three questions in the study. The first research question was "what is the dominant teaching style of the university instructors in the sample?" The results indicated that the dominant teaching style of university GATs investigated is teacher-centered. This finding concurs with many previous studies that reported instructors resort to traditional, teacher-centered styles in different teaching settings. For example, in distance teaching, Dupin-Bryant (2004) reported 79.8 percent of 203 interactive television instructors displayed inclinations towards a teacher-centered approach, in which 12.8 percent showed extreme preference, 34 percent showed very strong preference and 33 percent showed increased preference. In adult education, Spoon and Schell (1998) also reported a moderate preference for a teacher-centered approach by both teachers and learners. More recently, Conti (2004) concluded that teacher-centered style is "currently the dominant approach throughout all levels of education in North America" (p.77). This study provides further support to the identification of teacher-centered styles in practice in university settings.

In general, research theories have always advocated strategies, methods and activities associated with learner-centered teaching style. The learner-centered style is regarded as an effective and democratic way of improving students' motivation, participation and final achievements in all kinds of learning processes. However, the descriptive results in this study along with previous research studies indicate that instructors employed teacher-centered approaches in actual practice. This discrepancy between theory and practice suggests that on one hand, more training and support programs are necessary in higher education to facilitate the instructional change. On the other hand, more detailed discussions are necessary to further specify what are genuine learner-centered actions and what are true teacher-centered ones.

With regard to the second research question "among the seven factors in PALS, which are easiest for the instructors to achieve?", results in this study indicated that university GATs practice "climate building" (88%), "relating to experience" (75%), and "assessing student needs" (69%) most successfully, "learner-centered activities" (62%) and "participation in the learning process" (55%) fairly well, and "personalizing instructions" (47%) and "flexibility of personal development" (40%) rather poorly.

These findings provide useful information for training programs for instructors. Instead of looking at the learner-centered approach as an empty

concept, the results in this study reveal some concrete actions instructors might want to incorporate into practice. For example, to improve their performance on "personalizing instructions" and "flexibility of personal development", the lowest two factors in the present study, teachers should give students more freedom to work on their own rate ("personalizing instructions"); they might not need to stick to the course objectives in the syllabus they wrote at the beginning of a semester ("flexibility of personal development"); and lecturing may not always be the best method for presenting subject materials ("personalizing instructions").

As for the third research question "What variables influence instructors' teaching style?", results showed that length of teaching in the US and course type (language/content) are the best predictors of an instructor's total scores on the APALS. The longer an instructor has taught in the US, the higher the total score is. It may be attributed to the current trend to adopt a learner-centered teaching style in the US. The longer they teach, the more they are influenced by the paradigm shift. However, we should notice that this paradigm shift is not complete because most instructors are still practicing a teacher-centered style. On the other hand, with the same length of teaching in the US, language instructors scored slightly higher than content instructors. This may be explained by the different nature of course types. Content course instructors may think of themselves as more knowledge providers than facilitators. By contrast, language instructors position themselves more as facilitators. The adoption of the communicative language teaching approach, which is in sharp contrast to traditional teacher-fronted grammar teaching, also helps them move toward a more learner-centered style. However, it is important to point out that most language instructors in this study still demonstrate a teacher-centered style as measured by the APALS.

This study does not confirm that variables such as level of education, and type of courses significantly influence teaching style as in McCollin's (2000) study. Rather, it confirms Seevers and Clark's (1993) study: variables such as gender and age have little influence. These findings suggest that factors influencing a teacher's teaching style are complex and more research is needed to isolate those indicators.

CONCLUSION

The learner-centered approach is praised in research and practice to address individual learners' needs. However, the findings of this study along with previous research studies indicate that instructors still use traditional, teacher-centered styles in university settings. Therefore, a discrepancy between theory and practice has been identified. This indicates that the learner-centered approach is not widely practiced in universities. Awareness of this discrepancy may encourage universities to promote more training in the learner-centered approach.

One implication of this study for second language teaching is that teacher training should address this discrepancy. Using seven factors in APALS to conceptualize learner-centered teaching styles is a concrete way to raise teachers' awareness of their teaching style and help teachers move towards a learner-centered approach. Some factors are easier to achieve so that teachers could start with these practices. For example, teachers could accept errors as a natural part of the language learning process ("climate building"), and plan learning activities to take into account students' prior experiences ("relating to experience"). The least practiced factors "personalizing instruction" and "flexibility for personal development" should be incorporated in the curriculum of teacher training. Specific materials and activities should be designed to tap this difficulty.

Due to the sample size of the study, further research with larger samples needs to be conducted to investigate other variables that may influence the teaching styles. Indeed, follow-up studies could be conducted using observational research methods and interviews. Observing actual classroom behavior and interviewing the instructors would provide more insight into the teaching styles used by the instructors and the variables that may influence these styles.

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APPENDIX

Adapted PALS

Disclaimer: The following questionnaire is designed for research on your teaching. Please answer each question according to your own opinion and teaching experience of **the course** you indicate below. All the data collected will be highly confidential and will be used for the research only. First, please fill in some personal information and then answer questions of the questionnaire. Thanks for your cooperation.

Personal information:

Gender: Female/ Male Age:
Native language(s):_____
Nationality:_____ Length of residence in the USA:_____
Major:_____
Level of completed education: BA / MA / Doctor
Country where you got your highest degree:_____
Course name (one only please): _____
Length of teaching experience in your home country :_____
Length of teaching experience in the USA :_____

Questionnaire:

Disclaimer: The following questionnaire is designed for research on your teaching. Please answer each question according to your own opinion and teaching experience of **the course** you indicate below. All the data collected will be highly confidential and will be used for the research only. First, please fill in some personal information and then answer questions of the questionnaire. Thanks for your cooperation.

Personal information:
Gender: Female/ Male Age:
Native language(s):_____
Nationality:_____ Length of residence in the USA:_____
Major:_____
Level of completed education: BA / MA / Doctor
Country where you got your highest degree:_____
Course name (one only please): _____
Length of teaching experience in your home country :_____
Length of teaching experience in the USA :_____

Questionnaire:
Directions: The following survey contains 26 items that a teacher might do in a classroom. For each item please respond to the way you most frequently practice the action described in the item. Your choices are Always, Almost Always, Often, Seldom, Almost Never, and Never. Underline 0 if you always do the event; underline number 1 if you almost always do the event; underline number 2 if you often do the event; underline number 3 if you seldom do the event; underline number 4 if you almost never do the event; and underline number 5 if you never do the event. If the item **does not apply** to you, underline number 5 for never.

Always	Almost Always	Often	Seldom	Almost Never	Never
0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

1. I allow students to participate in developing the criteria for evaluating their performance in class.
0 1 2 3 4 5
2. I help students find out the gaps between their goals and their present level of performance.
0 1 2 3 4 5
3. I provide knowledge rather than serve as a resource person.
0 1 2 3 4 5
4. I stick to the course objectives in the syllabus that I write at the beginning of a semester.
0 1 2 3 4 5
5. I use lecturing as the best method for presenting my subject material to students.
0 1 2 3 4 5
6. I arrange the classroom so that it is easy for students to interact.
0 1 2 3 4 5
7. I get a student to motivate himself/herself by confronting him/her in the presence of classmates during group discussions.
0 1 2 3 4 5
8. I plan learning activities to take into account my students' prior experiences.
0 1 2 3 4 5
9. I allow students to participate in making decisions about the topics that will be covered in class.
0 1 2 3 4 5

10. I use one basic teaching method because I have found that most students have a similar style of learning.

0 1 2 3 4 5

11. I encourage discussion among my students.

0 1 2 3 4 5

12. I accept errors as a natural part of the learning process.

0 1 2 3 4 5

13. I have individual conferences to help students identify their needs.

0 1 2 3 4 5

14. I let each student work at his/her own rate regardless of the amount of time it takes him/her to learn a new concept.

0 1 2 3 4 5

15. I help my students develop short-term as well as long-term objectives.

0 1 2 3 4 5

16. I maintain a well-disciplined classroom to reduce interferences to learning.

0 1 2 3 4 5

17. I avoid discussion of controversial subjects that involve value judgments.

0 1 2 3 4 5

18. I use methods that foster quiet, productive, deskwork.

0 1 2 3 4 5

19. I use tests as my chief method of evaluating students.

0 1 2 3 4 5

20. I plan activities that will encourage each student's growth from dependence on others to greater independence.

0 1 2 3 4 5

21. I adjust my instructional objectives to match the individual abilities and needs of the students.

0 1 2 3 4 5

22. I avoid issues that relate to the student's concept of himself/herself.

0 1 2 3 4 5

23. I encourage my students to ask questions.

0 1 2 3 4 5

24. I have my students identify their own problems that need to be solved.

0 1 2 3 4 5

25. I give all students in my class the same assignment on a given topic.

0 1 2 3 4 5

26. I encourage competition among my students.

0 1 2 3 4 5

(Adapted from PALS, Conti, 2004)