

## A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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### Abstract

The balance of talk time in the classroom should reflect the new student-centered methods in teaching languages. The author offers a summary of student-centered learning and the rationale for reducing or adjusting a teacher talk time and provides some guidelines for the classroom.

**Keywords:** teacher-talk; student-talk; student-centered; learner-centered; flipped classroom.

## ЛИЧНОСТНО-ОРИЕНТИРОВАННЫЙ ПОДХОД К ОБУЧЕНИЮ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКАМ

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### Аннотация

Баланс времени разговора в классе должен отражать новые методы, ориентированные на учащихся в преподавании языков. Автор предлагает резюме обучения, ориентированного на учащегося, и обоснование сокращения или корректировки времени беседы учителей и дает некоторые рекомендации для класса.

**Ключевые слова:** беседа учителей; студенческая беседа; ориентация на учеников; ориентация на учащихся; перевернутый класс.

## ЧЕТ ТИЛЛАРНИ ЎҚИТИШ УЧУН ШАХСГА ЙЎНАЛТИРИЛГАН ЁНДАШУВ

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### Аннотация

Дарс вақтида сўзлашувга ажратилган вақт чет тиллар ўқитишнинг янги – тил ўрганувчиларга асосий эътибор қаратилган методлари ёрдамида тақсимланиши мақсадга мувофиқ. Мақола муалифи тил ўрганувчиларга йўналтирилган ўқитиш мазмуни ҳақида ўз фикрларини беради ва дарс давомида ўқитувчининг сўзлашиши учун ажратилган вақтни иложи борича қисқартириш ёки тўғрилаш фикрини асослайди ва бу борада айрим тавсияларини беради.

**Калит сўзлар:** ўқитувчи сўзлашиши; тил ўрганувчининг сўзлашиши; марказида талаба бўлган; марказида ўрганувчи бўлган; аралаш синф.

Learning foreign languages has become prestigious for the last 30–40 years especially in the developing countries. To our mind, this is the main factor for the increase of number of international students studying abroad. Knowing at least one foreign language (in most cases this is being the English language) gives great

opportunities for those young people who are willing to work in a prestigious job. At the same time it should be noted that EFL teaching has also become one of the most developed field of our life. An important part here takes so called communicative method of teaching, where a foreign language learner is motivated to use the language most of the time, even with some mistakes. Another peculiar feature of this method is the role of an EFL teacher in the classroom. Below we will discuss some issues related to the role of EFL teacher in a classroom.

The best teachers are passionate about sharing the subject matter they teach. However, that enthusiasm may result in an imbalance of a teacher-talk and a student-talk in the classroom. “Teaching is much more than a performance by the teacher. Above all, a successful lesson makes the learners – rather than the teacher – the focus of the lesson” (7, 120). The ways students receive, retain, and use content is the appropriate focus. Teachers are no longer viewed as “a tap pouring water into an empty vessel”, or “conductors of orchestras” but instead as “a gardener, supplying materials for growth... and rearranging the environment... for this to happen” (5, 46).

Communicative language teaching (CLT) focuses on developing communicative competence and facilitating the use of meaningful, authentic interaction. In supporting student interaction, the issue of teacher talk" in the classroom arises. The following paragraphs will explore the concepts of the student-centered approach and the need for reducing a teacher talk in the classroom. Finally some guidelines for classroom implementation will be explored.

**The Student-Centered Approach.** Student-centered or learner-centered approaches employ a teacher in multiple roles that focus on a student’s needs, motivations, and collaboration. The teacher in a student-centered model finds ways to teach new content in engaging ways, makes connections between new and previous content, and gives students the chance to analyze, reflect, apply, and reinforce the concepts. The teacher should model the language as well as support and guide learning. Additionally, the teacher uses comprehensible language, provides examples of how the language is used and opportunities to use it, uses questioning techniques to guide, and understands nonverbal communication (7, 145).

The student-centered approach, sometimes referred to as the flipped learning model, includes an emphasis on ongoing informal assessment and feedback, as well as the integration of project-based learning (1, 432–433). The teacher is an observer and knowledgeable facilitator, continually monitoring and providing feedback rather than directing, while students engage in collaborative project-based tasks with clear outcomes. Direct instruction can be moved outside the classroom using technology resources

such as videos or web tools instead of in-class lectures (10, 41–42). Because this model centers around students’ collaborative activities, the teacher is able to provide more opportunities for authentic interactions and provide more consistent informal assessment and feedback.

A study of a flipped classroom versus a traditional classroom found that students improved achievement in grammar student learning outcomes as well as perceived more confidence in their grammar skills, which was comparable to other studies of the effects on achievement (10, 58). Additionally, Sanford describes the “student-directed approach”, which “forces students to bear the responsibility for their own learning experiences” (8, 15). In this approach, students teach a concept or design and lead activities with support from the teacher. Sanford has seen improvement in students’ scores as well as motivation. Implementing a model that gradually moves a teacher talk out of the classroom boosts academic achievement and learning.

**Teacher Talk.** As McLean states, “Teachers talk too much”. He suggests the obvious solution, which is “for the teacher consciously to become more silent, so that the learner may become more vocal” (6, 33). Teachers need to be aware of with what, how, and how much they are filling the classroom with their voices in balance to students’ voices.

In a strategy known as “reciprocal teaching”, the teacher increases student-talking time by encouraging students to respond using longer utterances and by providing students with openings to talk in class. Some student tasks include paraphrasing other students’, using reported speech, forming questions, and explaining concepts they understand from a lesson or an interaction (9, 21). The focus is on increasing student-talk time and reducing teacher-talk time.

More than anything, teachers need to treat their role(s) in the classroom appropriately. O’Hara (2003) uses the term “transformative pedagogy”, in which “the goal of education is the *facilitation* of change and learning. Learning how to learn is more important than being taught something from the “superior” vantage point of a teacher who unilaterally decides what shall be taught” (2, 90). The amount and the effectiveness of a teacher talk in the classroom should be considered as part of this role as a facilitator. Below are some guidelines to reduce ineffective a teacher talk, increase a student talk and interaction, and utilize student-centered techniques in the classroom.

**Classroom Guidelines: Reduce Teacher Talk and Foster Student Interaction.** With the learner-centered approach in mind, below are some guidelines that inform effective a teacher-student interaction.

1. Be comfortable with awkward silence.

**Why?** According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), three to five seconds of wait time reduces the chance of students not responding, allows for longer student responses and more participation, and students tend to begin to respond or question without the direct involvement of the teacher (3, 347–348). McLean advocates for a short silence following the introduction of new material based on research that a silence of about twenty seconds aids in the transfer of information from short to long term memory (6, 34). Allowing students some time with silence can provide that processing time.

**How?** Wait for longer silences after presenting new concepts. Train students to use the silence think. Instruct students to give their work partners time to respond. Scaffold by modeling and allowing students time to process the model.

2. Teach students how to deal with language barriers.

**Why?** Students need instruction in ways to deal with language gaps. Training students to ask for help consistently will reduce a teacher talk as students take control of their own understanding. They will be equipped to ask a clarification question or state that they do not understand. This training also practices a skill to help them navigate similar difficulties outside the classroom.

**How?** Many textbooks have a list of helpful classroom strategies at the beginning of the book, or they can be introduced as needed. For lower levels to ask about new words, they can learn the question “What is\_ ?” For intermediate levels, students may need hesitation devices like, “Let me think... ” or “I’m not sure”. Provide students with the questions they can ask instead of supplying an unsolicited answer. Consistently encourage students to use these types of strategies.

3. Focus on student learning outcomes.

**Why?** Lessons and activities with a purpose are more meaningful and authentic. McLean **observes**, “we seldom read anything without a reason; yet that is what we ask our learners to do **time and time** again” (6, 33). Setting a purpose from the beginning can allow learners to take **control of** their learning. With clear objectives and involvement in objectives, students will be more **inclined to** participate.

**How?** Begin lesson plans and activities with the outcomes in mind. Write the objectives on **the** board and connect those objectives to real world situations or other concepts students have **studied**. **Ask** students what they have learned and are able to do at the end of the class.

4. Provide input for students from other sources.

**Why?** **Field** trips, classmates’ presentations of information, readings from different genres, **and audio and** video input are valuable sources of information

and an alternative to a teacher talk. **Technology can** also play a role. The integration of technology in the classroom such as using **computers** or other tools for independent work or collaborative work allow students more freedom **in exploring** what they choose to learn about, as well as availability to reach audiences and allow for **more social** interaction (4, 200). Teachers guide learners in ways to find information, clarify **questions or** misunderstandings, express the information learned and share it with others, and **evaluate sources** of **information** using critical thinking.

**How?** Use technology sources like videos or websites to present information outside of the **classroom** prior to practicing the concepts in class. Design project-based collaborative tasks that **place students as** gatherers and presenters of information. Teach students to use an online corpus **tool to analyze and** use language forms on their own. Provide interesting articles, stories, or videos **that stimulate** student interest and spark discussion among students.

5. Ask questions rather than give answers.

**Why?** Questions can be grouped as either display questions or referential questions. Display questions simply check comprehension; referential questions, on the other hand, provide the opportunity for the student to offer an answer that is not prescribed, like an opinion or a creative solution **to a problem (3, 346)**. Of course, some display questions to check comprehension are important **in** the classroom, but there should be a balance with referential questions that push students to think critically, evaluate, and synthesize information. According to Crookes and Chaudron (2001), the type of questioning most used in the classroom is display questioning in spite of the fact that this type of questioning does not reflect an authentic use of language (3, 347).

**How?** Ask more referential questions to students in balance to display questions. Students with referential questions to ask each other, and train students, especially at the levels, to ask *these types* of questions on their own. Provide opportunities for students to form their own questions and find the answers, such as survey activities, research projects, or interviews.

Reducing teacher talk time does not mean that a teacher must be silent. However, teachers need to give up *their* own talk time to provide more opportunities for students to practice authentic **interaction and take on more** responsibility in their learning. Teachers should choose interactive activities, train students to have less dependency, or make more conscious choices in a teacher talk **such as the types of** questions they ask students. To return to the metaphor of the role of a teacher as “**gardeners**”, teachers should reflect on their talk in the classroom and pull the weeds of **ineffective talk** time to make room for growth in student learning.

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