An analysis of the extent to which English Second Language teacher educators are implementing learner-centred teaching and learning: a case study

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The primary learning environment for undergraduate students, the fairly passive lecture discussion format where teacher educators talk and most students listen, is contrary to almost every principle of an optimal student learning setting. The current view in higher education is that teacher educators need to focus on student learning rather than on teaching. One of the challenges in moving a university, and in this case specifically a Faculty of Education Sciences, toward learner centredness is to help teacher educators understand what learner centredness means and to help them overcome implementation barriers. The purpose in this article was to a) determine the nature and scope of English Second Language (ESL) teacher educators' tasks at a tertiary institution, b) determine the extent to which ESL teacher educators are implementing a learner centred approach to teaching and learning, c) identify the factors, if any, that impede the transition to a learner centred approach to teaching and learning, and d) provide recommendations to facilitate the implementation of a learner centred approach to teaching and learning within a faculty of education sciences.

**Introduction**

The environment around us is changing at a dramatic, ever accelerating pace. Earlier strategic planning efforts are no longer adequate to deal with current circumstances. Major transformations, especially in education, are now the order of the day (Barker, 1992; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Reynolds, 2000). In order to ensure that students are able to cope with the major changes in the nature of the work force as well as the diverse and frequent skill updates required to cope with the information age and rapidly changing business needs (cf. Slaughter, 1998; Schrum, 2000), teacher education needs to become more learner centred (Bitzer, 1999; Van den Berg & De Boer, 2000; Niemi, 2002).

In 1998, the Senate of the Potchefstroom University made a decision to "offer, with flexible learning (which encompasses all learning environments), cost effective and accessible higher educational programmes of high quality in a learner centred approach". However, even though universities are strong advocates of the need for reform and a shift to learner centred teaching and learning, most programmes are still being taught in very traditional ways (i.e. teacher centred/instruction centred) (Dreyer & van der Walt, 1996; Dreyer, 1998). One of the challenges in moving a university, and in this case specifically a Faculty of Education Sciences, toward learner centredness is to help teacher educators understand what learner centredness means. The idea of focusing on learning rather than teaching requires that teacher educators rethink their role and the role of students in the teaching and learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). When focusing on learning rather than teaching, teacher educators must challenge their basic assumptions about how people learn and what the roles of a teacher educator should be. It may be necessary to unlearn previously acquired teaching habits, and rethink the role of assessment and feedback in learning. A paradigm shift may be necessary. How do teacher educators do this? To develop new conceptualisations, teacher educators must analyse their old ways of thinking and make continuous changes. If old ways of thinking are not analysed, they remain unchanging, existing patterns continue, and "structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner" (Senge, 1990:60). Teacher educators must want to be entwined in an educational environment that is shifting from providing instruction to producing learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Parallel to the calls for change are systematic analyses of factors impeding transition related to learner centredness (cf. Montgomery & McGovern, 1997; Talle & Taber, 1996). The pressures on a faculty of education sciences to respond to changes in teaching and learning and to overcome implementation barriers are considerable. Teacher educators may not always perceive the relevance in all these calls for change, and yet, they are supposed to be educating students to become professionals in the new type of educational environments that they may not even know how to demonstrate themselves. It is necessary for teacher educators to practise the change that they are preaching, if they are even preaching it. Teacher educators at university need to model the teaching and learning context that they want pre service teachers to create in their own classrooms in future (cf. Barr & Tagg, 1995).

The purpose in this article was to a) determine the nature and scope of English Second Language (ESL) teacher educators' tasks at a tertiary institution, b) determine the extent to which ESL teacher educators are implementing a learner centred approach to teaching and learning, c) identify the factors, if any, that impede the transition to a learner centred approach to teaching and learning, and d) provide recommendations to facilitate the implementation of a learner centred approach to teaching and learning within a faculty of education sciences.

**Exploring learner-centredness**

The primary learning environment for undergraduate students, the fairly passive lecture discussion format where teacher educators talk and most students listen, is contrary to almost every principle of an optimal student learning setting (Guskin, 1997). Chickering and Gamson (1987:3) state that: "Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers". Similarly, King and Kitchener (1994:239) state that: "Classes in which students are expected to receive information passively rather than to participate actively will probably not be effective in encouraging students to think reflectively. Similarly, tests and assignments that emphasize only others' definitions of the issues or others' conclusions will not help students learn to define and conclude for themselves". This does not mean that teacher centred methods are not effective, "but the evidence is equally clear that these conventional methods are not as effective as some other, far less frequently used, methods" (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994:29).

The current view in higher education is that teacher educators need to focus on student learning rather than on teaching (cf. Table 1). According to Englekeumeny and Brown (1998), the reason is not so much that the traditional approach is "broken" and in need of "fixing", but rather that teacher educators are under performing. "We have failed to realize the synergistic effect of designing, developing, and delivering curricula, programs, and services that collaboratively and collectively deepen, enhance, and enable higher levels of learning" (Engelkeumeny & Brown, 1998:10).

Learning centredness is more than just an approach to teaching
A one shot cross sectional survey design was used in this study.

1995). Learning and individual progress in meeting course objectives (Plater, 1992; first and second year) become less a function of programme organization and more a function of learner needs and priorities (Plater, 1992). Within the year, traditional subject sequences (first and second semester) can work ahead, concentrate on weaknesses, or pursue other priorities. Changes in the focus from teaching to learning and assessment are of the utmost importance. A student completing a specific learning outcome can work ahead, concentrate on weaknesses, or pursue other priorities. Similarly, traditional semester dates take on less importance. A student completing a specific learning outcome can work ahead, concentrate on weaknesses, or pursue other priorities.

In the learner centred environment, time changes. The "timetable" is less of a regimen than it once was. There are fewer scheduled "class" hours; students use the institution's learning centres at any time of the week. Similarly, traditional semester dates take on less importance. A student completing a specific learning outcome can work ahead, concentrate on weaknesses, or pursue other priorities. Similarly, traditional semester dates take on less importance. A student completing a specific learning outcome can work ahead, concentrate on weaknesses, or pursue other priorities.

Instrumentation
Three data collection techniques were used in this study. The purpose was to triangulate the data in order to get as complete a picture as possible of the extent to which the teacher educators’ teaching and learning practices reflected a focus on learner centredness.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire consisted of two sections, namely Section A which focused on the task analysis of the teacher educators, and Section B which focused on questions relating to the teaching and learning practices in their ESL classes. The questionnaire was developed in order to determine the nature and scope of teacher educators' tasks as well as their comments on the teaching and learning practices within their ESL classes. The questionnaire had content and face validity.

Interviews
Semi structured interviews were held with each of the teacher educators in order to ask follow up questions with regard to the teaching and learning practices within their ESL classes.

Observations
The researcher obtained permission from each of the teacher educators to observe their contact sessions with the students for a period of two weeks. The purpose of the observations was to determine whether there was a correlation between the comments made on the questionnaire, the answers during the interviews, and what actually happened during the contact sessions. A checklist was used to record the data that were gathered during the class observations.

Data collection procedure
The teacher educators were asked to complete the questionnaire at the beginning of the second semester of 2003. Individual appointments were scheduled for the interviews with each of the teacher educators. The observations were conducted during the second and third week of the second semester.

Data analysis
Descriptive statistics (means and percentages) were used to analyse the data. In order to express the data in terms of percentages, the total number of hours that the teacher educators spent on their tasks (i.e. teaching, preparation, assessment and feedback, administration, outside class contact, research and community service) was added to get the value of Y. The total number of hours spent on each task was then added separately to get the value of X. To convert the values to percentages, the following formula was used:

$$X \left( \frac{\text{Total number of hours for each task}}{T} \right) \times 100$$

where X is the value of the task, T is the total number of hours for all tasks, and Y is the total number of hours spent on each task.
The data collected during the interviews are reported as narratives.

**Results and discussion**

The results of this study are presented under the following headings:

- The nature and scope of ESL teacher educators' tasks
- The extent of the implementation of a learner centred teaching and learning approach
- Factors impeding a transition to learner centredness

**The nature and scope of ESL teacher educators' tasks**

The results of the full time task analysis indicated that five full time lecturers, within the subject group English in the Faculty of Education Sciences, were responsible for teaching a total of 998 full time students during the first semester and 472 full time students during the second semester.

The results of the full time task analysis indicated further that the teacher educators spent 2% of their time doing community service, 5.4% of their time doing administrative duties, 11.6% of their time was spent on research, 12.7% of their time was spent on teaching (i.e. contact sessions), 34% of their time was spent on assessment and 34.6% of their time was spent on preparation for teaching and learning.

When the teacher educators' task analyses for flexi modules (i.e. modules for off campus students) were taken into account, it became evident that a significant percentage of their time was spent on assessment (64%) and administrative duties associated with the assessment task (21%). Teacher educators only spent 4% of their time on teaching and 11% on preparation for teaching and learning.

The complete task analysis of teacher educators indicated that teacher educators spent 2% of their total time on community service, 9% of their time on research and 9% of their time on administrative duties, 11% of their time was spent on contact sessions, 30% of their time was spent on preparation for teaching and learning and 39% of their time was spent on assessment.

It was evident from the results that the teacher educators in this study spent a significant percentage of their time on assessment and preparation for teaching and learning. The question that arises, however, is the extent to which the teacher educators implement a learner centred approach in their assessment practices, their preparation for teaching and learning, and, subsequently, their contact sessions with students.

**Methods of instruction**

The results indicated that the teacher educators assumed most of the responsibility for determining the learning goals, delivering what they determined to be crucial information, providing feedback when possible, and assessing learning outcomes. They determined what ought to be taught, when, how and in what time frame. Students had no input in the decision making process and they did not get the opportunity to set their own learning goals, make connections between prior knowledge and experience, build pathways for new understanding and continuously modify their behaviour to better achieve those goals. Students and teacher educators, therefore, acted independently and in isolation.

Although students were actively involved during contact sessions, answering questions, working in groups and delivering presentations, they were not actively involved in their own learning processes and had minimum experience of planning and building their own learning tasks and environments. Their main responsibility regarding the learning process was completing assignments, preparing prescribed work and coming to class prepared for discussions.

Overall, it seemed that although the teacher educators embraced methods such as interactive engagement during contact sessions and collaborative instruction, the curriculum to be covered took precedence and the emphasis remained on the content lecturing. The teacher educators, therefore, provided instruction rather than produced learning. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- Certain content asks for lecturing. I try to vary my strategies, but students prefer lecturing. The responsibility students have for the learning process is to participate in group discussions, complete assignments, prepare for classes and research certain topics. The assignments are mostly given in the study guide and are, therefore, quite set but I try to give them a choice sometimes. I don't give students as much responsibility as I would like to.

**Integrating teaching and learning**

The parts of the teaching and learning process were still seen as discrete entities. The teacher educators’ view of academic learning time was mainly focused on contact sessions; they were focused on what to present in the contact sessions and then spent more time organising presentations of information rather than developing materials to facilitate learning. The teacher educators did not create environments both in and outside the classroom that brought students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves; that encouraged students to reflect and interact, and that supplied opportunities for students to master and apply what they had learned in authentic contexts. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- I seldom use time in variable and flexible ways to match students' needs due to [sic] lack of contact time. I try to give them enough time in class to discuss difficult concepts, but contact time is not enough to go into as much detail as I would’ve liked. Contact time is not enough for students to practice [sic] and apply new knowledge and skills, but it is usually reflected, to some extent, in the projects, practical teaching and examinations.

**Focus on learning strategies**

The teacher educators strove to develop the students' higher order thinking skills by providing stimulating and guiding questions, but there was a limited incorporation or focus on learning strategies, specifically meta cognitive strategies. Students were not tutored on how to process and organise knowledge, how to use source materials, or how to monitor their learning progress. The use of memory strategies still tended to dominate. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- It is in the study guide, but there is not time in contact sessions to do this in detail. Students are allowed and encouraged to analyse, criticize, evaluate content, and discuss controversial statements. I teach them to focus on main issues, to really comprehend, be analytical and respond to material.
Utilizing technology
As far as educational technologies are concerned, the teacher educators made use of traditional media (e.g. blackboard, overhead projector, video and audiotapes). These were mainly used to support teaching and learning during contact sessions and not to enhance and extend learning beyond the classroom walls. Media were used to highlight certain concepts and explain content. They did not form an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

Assessment practices
Progress of student learning was monitored mostly by means of summative assessment techniques with the focus on grading of students. While this was usually done at the end of a period of teaching, the teacher educators and the students received delayed feedback which meant that neither of the groups could adjust their teaching or learning if it was required.

Students had no real input and choice in the design of the assessment system. They seldom engaged in self-assessment activities and had minimal opportunity to reflect on their own progress. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- I sometimes use peer assessment, but it would be good practice to let the students design their own grids for assessment.
- I do not give as much opportunity for self assessment as I could.
- I monitor progress by means of regular assignments, class quizzes, tests and projects.
- Comments are written in portfolios, but our workload is a problem as far as feedback is concerned.

Factors impeding a transition to learner-centredness
Teacher educators participating in this study were fully aware that change was inevitable and that their educational approach should reflect a shift from teaching to learning. Although attempts were made to implement a learner-centred approach, teacher educators often reverted to more familiar, traditional approaches (i.e. teacher centred).

During the interviews and when answering the questionnaires, the teacher educators emphasized the following issues as affecting the effective and efficient transition to learner-centredness:

Curriculum coverage and lack of time
Courses were overloaded and teacher educators experienced a sense of continuous time pressure. They felt that learner-centred methods would take too much time and they felt that they could not take the "risk" of not covering all the content in the curriculum, especially within a policy of reduced contact time. Active learning methods required much more work from a teacher educator than traditional teaching. Much more intensive preparation was needed than for traditional teaching; more planning and more preparation of learning materials (Hansen, 2000; Niemi, 2002).

The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews:

- There is no time for this.
- I find it impossible to accommodate all the different styles and needs within a contact session.
- The designing of interactive study guides and methods are [sic] time consuming.
- The workload remains a problem.

Lack of proper training
In a learner-centred approach, teacher educators had to fulfil a new pedagogical role, but Boekaerts (1997:162) states that most teachers are not yet equipped to turn students into self-regulated learners. The teacher educators were still steering and guiding the learning process, a situation which did not invite students to use or develop their cognitive or motivational self-regulatory skills.

Reasons were that the teacher educators had not been exposed to other pedagogical styles and assessment strategies associated with them. Compulsory training in this regard was necessary as well as a basic knowledge and understanding of relevant, contemporary learning theories. Policies and management practices needed to be established to create a climate where the continuous improvement of instructional design is the norm (Sunal, Wright, Hodges & Sunal, 2000; Schulze, 2003:11).

Size of student groups
The size of student groups was too big and it was almost impossible to use active learning methods when classrooms could not accommodate large groups or were not well equipped. The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- Although I try to actively involve students in the learning process, classes have too many students to get every single one involved.
- If only the classroom was equipped, we could use time more effectively.

Other teacher educators’ cynical attitudes
According to Cuban (1990), lecturers’ beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning limit change. Some teacher educators are very cynical or experience burnout. They do not have the motivation or energy to apply new methods; they do not like to experiment with anything new or simply do not think it is necessary. This can lead to a lack of co-operation.

Students’ attitudes towards learning
The teacher educators complained that some students had learnt a passive learning culture in their school years and they continued this tradition in their university studies. Students could be very conservative and because they were inexperienced in using active learning strategies, they preferred that teacher educators talk and they write in their notebooks. Years of passive note taking and silent absorption of information had convinced many students that this was the appropriate way to learn. This learned helplessness could be a convenient way out for both students and teacher educators. Both sides had the illusion of success and neither wanted to replace the comfort zone they were in (Hansen, 2000; Niemi, 2002). The following comments and/or observations were written on the questionnaires and/or made during the interviews and class observations:

- Students don’t seem eager to change to a system in which they have more responsibility for learning.
- Students still prefer the old spoon feeding method where they don’t need to be actively involved.

Conclusion and recommendations
Teacher educators in the 21st century have a responsibility to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to enhance their learning experiences, and to create an environment that will make a difference in their students’ lives and the lives of others who follow their lead. The following recommendations are made in order to facilitate the implementation of learner-centred teaching and learning:

Re-examine the system
The information and knowledge age is giving educators an exciting opportunity to redesign, if not re-engineer, tertiary education systems. In current education reform efforts there are countless interventions that have only served to “tweak” the education system (e.g. reducing contact time, changing assessment practices, purchasing large quantities of expensive hardware and software). However, many of these attempts are mere “Band-Aid fixes”, resulting in no significant long lasting change. We must accept that when we attempt a large scale intervention, we are operating in a system comprised of many inter and intra related subsystems. A change in one will undoubtedly affect another. So we need to re-examine the system as a whole. We must challenge ourselves to “think out of the box”. We must envisage a
learning system where learners are self-regulated, motivated, and inspired to share information and knowledge with others, and where learner achievement and satisfaction are measurable and attainable results.

Education is a complex system, and implementing or delivering a large scale intervention must address the phases of a systematic design process (i.e. planning, analysing, designing, developing, implementing, evaluating and revising) (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). These phases are continuously revisited (an iterative process); this revisiting promotes continuous improvement and results in sustained delivery of high quality education.

Teacher educators and students should buy in
This whole process will only be possible if both teacher educators and students are willing and able to make this paradigm change. They have to understand the learning centred philosophy and be committed to the long process of moving out of the old ways of higher education and into a new challenging approach to learning (Garmon, 1999:1).

Teacher educators, above all, must share a compelling vision to change from the status quo to a more desirable state. Not only must they share the vision, they must buy in, enough to motivate, inspire, maintain, and sustain themselves and others to accomplishment. They must want to be entwined in an educational environment that is shifting from providing instruction to producing learning.

Creating/Enhancing learning environments
In an attempt to produce learning, the purpose of teacher educators is not to transfer knowledge but to create learning environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

There is no one "answer" to the question of how to organise such learning environments and experiences. It supports any learning method and structure that works, where "works" is defined in terms of learning outcomes, not as the degree of conformity to an ideal class room archetype. Attaining these learning outcomes is not bound by time and calendar constraints. Achievement is supported by flexible time frames and not bound by closed, structured teaching time. Learning programmes are open ended and creative. Learners are encouraged to form their own insights and create their own solutions (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Malan, 2000:27).

The chief agent in the process is thus the learner; therefore learning environments and activities should be learner-centred and learner controlled. They may even be teacherless. Whilst teacher educators will have designed the learning experiences and environments that students use, they need not be present for or participate in every structured learning activity (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

The use of educational technology
The constant change in technological advances, the information explosion, and rapid knowledge acquisition is demanding a learning/learner centred environment. No longer can teacher educators function as the sole source of knowledge. They must adopt the teaching/learning paradigm shift and embrace the use of technology to enhance the learning processes.

If implemented properly, technology has great potential for enhancing the learning environment of any course. Technology will permit instruction to be customised to the preferences, location, schedule, learning styles and other relevant characteristics of students and will enable them to master outcomes of their learning (SACS, 2000). The greatest potential of instructional technologies is making students more active, self-directed learners, capable of lifelong learning (cf. Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). Hawkins (1999), as cited in SACS, shares the optimism in the possibilities of technology to make effective, scalable learning environments that can transform higher education.

Because the Internet is widespread in numerous fields and domains it also carries great potential for educational use. In addition to the communication benefits of the Internet, it can also be used to retrieve and access information. The Internet offers numerous benefits to the language learner, and teacher educators in this domain should become familiar with using the Internet and its various functions. The more enthusiastic and knowledgeable language teacher educators are, the more successfully they will be able to implement technology in the language classroom. Although it cannot replace the teacher educator, it offers a vast amount of information and lends itself to communication possibilities that can greatly enhance the language learning experience (Singhal, 1999).

As part of the transmission of knowledge can be transferred to computers, teachers can gain time to work with students individually and in small groups and to serve more as guides and partners in the learning process. The benefits accruing from modern technology are dependent, however, on teacher educators’ mastery and skill in this domain (Ben Peretz, 2000).

Creating opportunities for co-operative learning
One way to get students more actively involved in and outside the classroom is to structure co-operative interaction into classes so that students explain what they are learning to each other, learn each other’s point of view, give and receive support from classmates, and help each other dig below the superficial level of understanding of the material they are learning. Co-operative learning may be incorporated through the use of informal learning groups, formal learning groups and base groups (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1990; Niemii, 2002).

By collaborating with their peers, students move away from dependence on the teacher educator and develop their own pool of resources. By explaining to one another how they arrived at the answers, vital language skills are developed, skills that will serve students well in their future academic careers and in other aspects of their lives where they collaborate with others (Hansen, 2000:6; Nel, Dreyer & Carstens, 2001:245).

Other indicators of student performance
When measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the change to a learner-centred approach, consider improvements on other indicators of student performance besides student academic gains (e.g. student attendance records, graduation rates, documented student involvement and participation, or attitudinal changes in learner satisfaction and confidence).

Training staff
The question is often asked: “Why do most of our significant change efforts seem to fail or be only partially successful?” According to Lick and Kaufman (2000), leaders will find that they may have implemented a strategic planning approach that is incomplete and inadequate for the massive, holistic, systemic change that is required. They may have failed to prepare their organisation for the important transformations that major change requires. For instance, before people will seriously commit to being an important part of major change, they must understand the essence of the change, appreciate why it is so important to the organisation and internal and external stakeholders, and accept, both intellectually and emotionally, the implications of the change for themselves personally. They may not have provided and implemented a detailed, structured, disciplined transition plan for identifying and then completing the major change, i.e. a plan that transitions people, processes, and, most importantly, culture from the old paradigm to the new one.

In order to produce the conceptual, procedural, curricular and other structural changes needed to transform faculties into learning centred institutions, all staff should, therefore, undergo in-service training or faculty development. Teacher educators, in addition to their subject expertise, need to be trained in identifying learning styles, modular curriculum development, and instructional technology and methodology, in order to become effective assessors of a student's abilities and potential, designers of learning environments and systems,
and trainers in how to access information and data (Flynn, 1999).

Professional development of staff consists of workshops and courses, written descriptions of effective practice, the use of peer con
tsultation and funded course development and action research. Re
search (e.g. Sunal et al., 2000) indicates that faculties with greater
knowledge of effective teaching strategies, and clearer ideas on plan
ning and carrying out change in their courses, are significantly more
likely to implement change.

To summarise, a great deal of research indicates that teacher edu
icators should change the way they deliver instruction in order to
enhance student learning. They should work together with students to
formulate outcomes that are both challenging and attainable, they
should create environments that enable students to work together col
taboratively, they should create opportunities for reflection and inter
action, they should supply opportunities for students to apply what
they have learned in new contexts and they should provide sufficient
feedback to students on their learning. Overall, teacher educators
should stimulate in students the motivation to learn by engaging them
fully in the learning process.

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