Factors Enhancing Learner-centered Teaching in Saudi EFL Classroom

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Factors enhancing LCT in Saudi Context

- This presentation focuses on two factors that are assumed to enhance LCT in Saudi Arabia: Information and communication technology (ICT) and the use of the learners’ mother tongue (MT).
- As to the first factor, The Internet World Stat (2011) has placed Saudi Arabia the top Internet Arab country in Asia with about 11.4 million users, indicating high digital literacy among the country population.
• Now given the observation that average Saudi student does not pay enough attention to his studies mostly owing to the monotony involved in traditional classroom, ICT can have far reaching consequences for his/her academic development
Regarding the other factor, i.e. learners’ MT, EFL research informs that learners’ MT can be used in the EFL classroom to check comprehension of a variety of concepts underlying class themes.

Over the years it has become clear that many college entrants at Majma’ah University could answer simple Yes/No or wh-questions of the type: Do you live in Al-Majma’ah? Where are you from? Why are you late?, etc.
Thus, if the classes are to be run monolingually, most students will be put at disadvantage.

In the following space each factor will be taken in turn in some detail.
The use of Learners MT

- From modern linguistics perspective, the role of the learners' mother tongue in second language acquisition is traceable to Lado (1957).

- Since the dominant learning theory at that time was the behaviorist psychology, most of its principles found their into language learning and, thus, into the formulation of the contrastive analysis hypothesis. Ellis (1985, p. 21) informs that the behaviorist psychology takes the position that learning of new habits can either be facilitated or impeded by habits that have already been learned.
Applied to second language acquisition (SLA), it is argued that learners' $L_1$ interferes with the structure of the target language. This form of linguistic interference is either positives, i.e. facilitates SLA, or negative, i.e. impedes SLA, depending on whether $L_1$ and the target language are structurally similar (ibid).
However, CAH received theoretical, empirical and practical criticisms. As to the first type of criticism, Chomsky (1959) argues that since the behaviorist learning was based on research findings carried out on animal behavior in laboratories, it could not be useful in accounting for language learning in natural settings.
Regarding the empirical criticism, a body of research was conducted on learners' L₂ actual performance where results have shown that the majority of learners' errors were not due to their L₁ interference (1973).

These findings have given rise to the third type of criticism; viz. the practical criticism. Linguists have concluded that "if the majority of learners' errors are not caused by interference, CAH is of limited value" (Ellis, 1985, p. 32). It has also been maintained that "CAH does did no more than confirm the average teacher's practical experience of where errors were likely to occur" (ibid).
Implicit in the criticism of CAH is the proposal that learners' L1 is irrelevant to L2 acquisition. With the advent of the direct and communicative methods of language teaching, it has become explicit that the mother tongue is a most unwelcome teaching and learning strategy in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Butzkamm (2003) laments that in foreign language (FL) classroom, the mother tongue issue becomes "a taboo subject, a source of embarrassment and using it is accompanied by feelings of guilt". Likewise, Karaliauskiene (2009, p. 1) concludes that "communicative research emphasizes the teaching of English through English, thus, rendering the use of the mother tongue uncommunicative, boring, pointless, difficult and irrelevant."
However, a number of theorists are of the view that learners $L_1$ can have a positive role in $L_2$ acquisition. For example, Cook (2007), as quoted in Karaliauskiene (2009, p. 5), argues that the importance of the mother tongue emanates from the fact that it is part of their culture; thus, disregarding it in the classroom can "de-motivate the students and be counter-productive."
Butzkamm (2003) contends that "the mother tongue is the master key to foreign languages, the tool which gives us the fastest, the surest, most precise, and most complete means of accessing language".

The mother tongue is so conceived because, the arguments go, it "awakens the potential for universal grammar that lies with us". He concludes that monolingual teaching is an "intrinsic impossibility" since the learner's need to "build upon existing skills and knowledge acquired in and through the mother tongue"
It was apparent then that if the classes were to be run in English only, most, if not all, of the students would be put at disadvantage. Thus, translation of new lexical items into Arabic was richly employed to facilitate the comprehension of the concepts underlying various classroom activities.
And given the fact the course materials were more advanced than the students’ actual levels, it was practically necessary to devise ways to enhance the students’ understanding of different components of different courses. Arabic was the only means for successful communication in the classroom. It was the language used to make requests, ask questions about different course items, etc.
All things being equal, Arabic proved to be very useful in the teaching of a number of grammatical rules. For example, were it not for the explanation of the Arabic counterparts of the English conditionals, the students would have understood the situations required each of the English conditional structures.

The same was true in the case of teaching the English phonotactics. It was only through the comparison of English and Arabic phonology that this concept could be clarified.
Some language educators might object to the legitimization of an explicit source of L2 errors that was condemned fifty-two years ago by the advocates of the contrastive analysis hypothesis.

However, such an objection seems to draw on the misconception that most learning takes place in the classroom, ignoring the fact that a class that takes a fifty-minute of teaching might require, say, seven days of studying at the library, home, camps, farms, etc. All these are situations that predominantly characterized by the use of Arabic.
To conclude, Atkinson (1987) points out that "a belief in the way one approaches a task is likely to affect one's chances of success. This view receives empirical support from Al-Nofaie (2010), who investigated Saudi EFL teachers and students’ attitude towards the use of Arabic in EFL classroom. Her findings revealed that the (systematic) use of Arabic was unavoidable both inside and outside the classroom."