IMPLEMENTING A STUDENT-CENTERED PEDAGOGY THROUGH
THE USE OF INTERESTING AND CULTURALLY
CONTEXTUALIZED AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

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Abstract

The selection and use of appropriate materials is one of the most critical challenges facing English teachers today. In this article, we tell the stories (vignettes) of some of the major challenges we have faced as educators in this regard, and we offer a research base and practical suggestions related to each vignette. Selection of interesting and culturally contextualized authentic materials can go a long way towards creating a student-centered pedagogy. This will help to increase student motivation, achievement, and retention. Our first recommendation is to cultivate interest in the classroom. Interest can be elicited by selecting materials that lead to individual interest, students' personal interests, situational interest, the inherent interest in a specific situation like a mystery or a puzzle, or topic interest, interest in the subject of the activity. An excellent way to elicit student interest is through the use of authentic materials. Teachers should endeavor to create interest in their classrooms by choosing interesting topics and texts, editing those texts, and using suspense and surprise. Our second suggestion is to use culturally contextualized authentic materials. These can come from two directions: either they can be situated in the culture of the students (the “home” culture), or they can be situated in the culture of native speakers (the “target” culture). Use of both types of cultural materials is important, and both can be termed “authentic.” The most important point is that the materials are authentic, and therefore more meaningful to students.

Introduction

In education today, there are often discrepancies between what teachers plan and what students actually do in their learning process. This conflict is absolutely one of the things to consider when teachers want to improve the teaching-learning process in their classrooms. Today’s educators must be willing to shift from the teacher-centered paradigm, which was in place when they themselves were students, to the new paradigm of student-centered education. This article was inspired by the challenges and opportunities experienced by the writers while attempting to implement a student-centered pedagogy. We hope to give a better picture of the necessary conditions for student-centered teaching and learning and to find local wisdom that enables English teachers to adopt this new paradigm of education. We will share some of our experiences as educators to provide a context for various aspects of student-centered learning. Understanding some of the successes and failures we have experienced in our careers may help to highlight the potential and importance of student-centered pedagogy in its many facets. Our shared teaching careers include students on all 6 (inhabited) continents, with ages ranging from primary school students to adults, and we believe that the common themes evident in quite disparate situations speak to the universality of the power of student-centered pedagogy.
Implementing A Student-Centered Pedagogy Through The Use Of Interesting And Culturally Contextualized Authentic Materials

**Interest**

**Vignette 1: Tabitha Kidwell**

I began my career in 2004 as a Peace Corps Volunteer English teacher in a secondary school in a small town in Madagascar. The school was quite underresourced; there were up to 70 students in one class, many of the classrooms did not have electricity, and there were no textbooks available. I had little teaching experience and limited knowledge of the local language and culture. As such, I relied heavily on the national curriculum and teacher-centered classroom activities. Some students were motivated and were able to excel, but far more were disenchanted with my class, the English language, and school in general. Classroom management, with so many students in one small room, was a major issue. I found I had the most success when I built lessons around aspects of the students daily lives. For example, the “food” lesson in the national curriculum included apples, bread, and beef as sample vocabulary items, but these did not correspond to the variety of foods that students ate on a daily basis. I adapted the lesson to include rice, mangoes, beans, and other foods more familiar to students, and I brought in a shopping basket full of the actual items. I presented the vocabulary by removing one item from the basket at a time, slowly and suspensefully. Students were engaged in the presentation and enthusiastic about using their new vocabulary—many said they were going to teach their family over dinner that evening. By including content that was interesting to the students, as well as teaching methods that elicited their interest, I began to see the power that a student centered pedagogy could have.

**Research Review: Interest**

Researchers have identified three basic types of interest that contribute to learning: *individual interest*, *situational interest*, and, more recently, *topic interest*.

*Individual interest* reflects students’ personal preferences, which are primarily influenced by their unique personalities. These interests develop over time and have long-lasting effects on a person’s preferences, knowledge, and values. This type of interest can be focused on a specific school subject (e.g. science or literature) or specific activities within pop culture (e.g. music, sports, or movies) (Ainley, Hidi and Berndorff, 2002). Hidi’s (1990) review of early research on the effects of individual interest showed that, when provided with material that individual students found interesting, students exhibited higher comprehension and recall, as well as more positive affect, and higher levels of perseverance and attention. This was generalizable across a variety of research studies involving various ages, levels, and subjects.

*Situational interest* is the inherent interestingness of a certain situation. This type of interest often is elicited by something in the environment, such as a text or conversation, and may have only a short-term effect (Hidi, 1990). This type of interest plays an important role in learning when students do not have pre-existing interest in or knowledge about a certain academic area that is in the curriculum (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). In a review of the research, Flowerday, Schraw, and Stevens (2004) identified several factors that lead to situational interest: text novelty, good organization, ease of comprehension, text coherence, vividness, and imagery. As situational interest increases, engagement also increases, and
attitudes become more positive (Flowerday, Schraw, and Stevens, 2004). Interesting stories and texts motivate people to read and positively influence their attitudes, comprehension, memory, depth of processing, and learning (Hidi, 1990). This is true for lectures, as well; lectures that are well constructed and include connections to student’s experiences were shown to be more effective at maintaining student interest levels (Tin, 2008).

If individual interest (which is generated by the student) and situational interest (which is generated by the environment) can be seen as a dichotomy, topic interest can be seen as the intersection of the two. Topic interest can be defined as the interest elicited by a word, title, or initial text that presents the reader with a topic. A study by Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff (2002) confirmed that the development of topic interest comes from both individual interest (i.e., students who had previously identified a certain topic as an interest of theirs were more likely to be interested in topics connected to that domain) and situational interest (i.e. an interesting title might “grab” students’ attention and get them started on the path to learning). The same study also examined the processes inherent in developing topic interest and manifesting its effects. Interest in the topic of a text contributed significantly to positive student affect, which in turn encouraged persistence in working with the material, which then led to improved learning. Interestingly, Shirey and Reynolds (1988) found that adults actually tend to allocate less attention and fewer cognitive resources to information they find interesting, but remember it better, suggesting that they are efficient readers, and do not expend energy on information they will learn without extra effort.

All three types of interest can be expected to have positive effects on learning, and they are likely to interact and influence each other’s development (Hidi, 1990). An individual’s well-developed personal interests can evoke strong feelings of situational interest should a topic come up related to his or her individual interest. On the other hand, one specific experience of situational interest might lead an individual to take up a long-lasting individual interest in the topic. No matter the type of interest involved, “the key to maintaining interest lies in finding ways to empower students by helping them [find] meaning or personal relevance” (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). One powerful way to do this is by presenting material in a more meaningful context that shows the importance of the learning or makes it personally relevant to students.

Practical Suggestions: Interest

The more that we can do as teachers to encourage and sustain student’s interest, the more success our students will have. Identifying and using individual interests, such as giving music-related texts to students who enjoy playing guitar, can be highly effective. This can, however, prove quite time-consuming for teachers, especially if there is a high teacher-student ratio (Hidi, 1990). Additionally, not all students have unique and well-developed interests on which to draw (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). Individual interests can best be incorporated on a large scale through student-choice. Students can be given a choice of reading topic, or the opportunity to give a presentation on a topic of interest to them. EFL class, where so much communication centers on the students’ own beliefs and experiences, lends itself easily to this kind of adaptation. Rather than requiring all students to present or
write about the same topic, like “The Importance of Education,” teachers can allow for individual variation by selecting topics like “How Education has Affected my Life.” Add to this the potential for students to communicate about their preferences, habits, families, aspirations, past experiences, and opinions, and you can see that EFL class offers many opportunities for the incorporation of individual interest.

An even more cost-effective strategy for teachers with large classes is to focus on developing situational and topic interest. If the class environment stimulates situational interest, students will be more motivated and are likely to make cognitive gains in areas where they initially had very little interest (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). Focus on situational interest is more likely to lead to learning gains for all students. To do this, teachers must adapt materials or presentation modes to maximize situational interest.

Regarding texts, if the provided text is very dry and uninteresting, situational interest will be an impossibility; replacing these texts with more interesting ones may be your only option. Familiarize yourself with English texts available in your school’s library or language office, and keep an eye out for interesting stories online or in the Jakarta Post that could make for interesting alternate texts. Keep a file of these texts on hand to replace the truly unsalvagable texts. Often, however, texts can be adapted to encourage more situational interest. Teachers need not be afraid to modify texts if the outcome is better learning! Remember the elements that lead to situational interest: text novelty, good organization, ease of comprehension, text coherence, vividness, and imagery (Flowerday, Schraw, and Stevens, 2004). Structural modification, such as adding or deleting information, can increase good organization and text coherence. Additional details and imagery can be inserted to make texts more vivid. Some texts could also be modified to a context like “space aliens” (as in the research by Cordova & Lepper, 1996, discussed above) simply by changing the names or places. To create text novelty, try to vary the texts used in class, and present them in different ways. Vividness and imagery can also be created by reading texts with students in class and having students act out or illustrate the stories they hear; you might even ask students to close their eyes and imagine the story as you read it aloud.

For class activities that do not involve texts, remember the power of novelty and suspense. Try to vary class activities so that students are not always stuck in the same routine; while some routine is helpful for classroom management, too much will make student’s ‘zone out.’ One way to do this is to offer students meaningful choices, like choosing between writing an essay about the life of a historical figure, about an event in their own life, or about a recent television program they saw. All three options will practice the simple past tense, but the choice will satisfy students’ needs for autonomy and will keep them more interested. Lastly, the simplest changes to your presentation style can do wonders to increase student learning. A student once told me about her favorite English teacher, but only detail that she could remember was that the teacher had a “magic bag” that she would pull items from when introducing vocabulary. What a basic but powerful way to make vocabulary presentations more engaging!
Cultural Contextualization and Adaptation of the Curriculum

Vignette: Hanung Triyoko

When I was in junior and senior high school, every school in the province of Jawa Tengah used the same English textbook. At that time, teachers, not exclusively English teachers, were required to teach from books recommended by a higher authority, at the provincial level or even at the national level. These textbooks and the curriculum behind them had little significance to students’ lives outside school, since the English textbooks were situated in a culture different from their own. It was not easy for me to understand names and events told in those books because those names and events were outside my own culture. Even though I was in many ways supported by teachers, friends, and other available resources of learning in the school, I often found learning English as inapplicable to my life. Had I not had a great intrinsic motivation to master English, I would have stopped learning English because of the many things I could not understand in my English textbooks. Many of my friends in junior and senior high schools only studied English to get a good grade; they saw English as compulsory subject that influenced their school achievement and no more than that. To compound the problem, teachers who were required to teach by the prescribed curriculum and textbooks were out of touch with the actual needs of the students.

When I became an English teacher myself, I realized that English was not a priority for many students. To remedy this, I attempted to expose students at STAIN, an Islamic university, to English for Islamic Studies as a branch of English for specific purposes. I hoped that there would be more opportunities for students to be aware that English is used not only to understand people from other cultures and religions, but that English can also be used to explain their own religion and cultures. For this course, I could not simply depend on a pre-determined curriculum or textbook because each class session came to follow the path of students’ needs as they came up. There was no curriculum or textbook that could satisfy all the needs that occurred during the classroom meeting. Creating resources to teach students was a burden for me, but it lead to increased student learning and insight. My students shared the understanding that English could be part of their life as a Muslim, and not solely a symbol of the western culture. Most of my students were really enthusiastic to talk in English about many concepts, values, and practices inherent in the study of Islam, since they generally learned and discussed those things in Arabic. Many of them were also challenged by the prospect of English as a means of sharing their Muslim faith. Secondly, my students could find more opportunities to contribute to the sharing of knowledge in the classrooms because we were discussing their own lives, experiences, and beliefs. I believe that many English teachers would improve their practice by providing more opportunities for students to personalize the learning materials and learning activities so that they can learn English in contexts familiar to their daily lives.

Literature Review: Cultural Contextualization and Adaptation of the Curriculum

In this paper, curriculum is defined as “…the content and purpose of an educational program together with their organization” (Walker, 1990). The governments of many nations have made efforts to have one common national curriculum. Supporters of the establishment
of a national curriculum argue that a national curriculum serves as a symbol of nation’s collective endeavours to improve education and protects the nation against individual choice led by the textbook market (Whitty, 1989, p. 339). With the Indonesian government’s limited education budget, many expenses are avoided by asking all provinces and districts to implement the same curriculum and to have national exams (Theisen, Hughes, and Spector, 1990). However, use of the national examination as a means to standardize the Indonesian education has been critiqued by many educational practitioners in Indonesia as unfair and misleading. According to Wirdana (2008), one of the flaws in organizing national exams is its potential to devalue students as individual beings. The gap between regions in Indonesia, in term of education facilities, is wide; therefore, students’ performances in the disadvantaged regions should not be measured with the same criteria used for students in the cities. Perhaps more importantly, the cultures of various students across the archipelago are ignored when all are taught using an identical curriculum that does not match their own background.

Indonesia is missing out on a powerful phenomenon, for extensive research has showed that cultural contextualization and personalization has a significant effect on student learning. Ross (1983) conducted an interesting study of the effect of adapting the content of a presentation to student background. His context was math story problems, which were adapted to deal with education or health care for groups of pre-service teachers and nurses, respectively. Students who received content that was contextualized to match their background scored higher on post-tests. Therefore, assimilating new information to previous knowledge will be easier if the context is familiar, and therefore meaningful learning will be more likely. In a similar study, Cordova and Lepper (1996) showed that even simple embellishments to contextualize a topic (In their study, a math game designed to practice arithmetic operations was either contextualized in “outer space,” “fantasy,” or was not contextualized.) can lead to significant learning gains and higher motivation. Additionally, the personalization of the process (some students had the opportunity to personalize their computer programs, by adding their name and personal details) led to even greater learning gains, as well as, again, increased motivation and involvement.

Personalization can be applied at the cultural level as well - students who read stories from their own culture have better understanding and recall than those reading stories from an unfamiliar cultural background; indeed, the cultural background has a greater effect than the syntactic or semantic difficulty of a text (Freimuth 2008). Cultural familiarity improves reading comprehension in many ways, such as “the speed of reading, reader perspective, recall of information, critical thinking, main idea construction processes as well as other reading processes” (Freimuth, 2008). This suggests that readings and classroom topics should be derived from the students’ own culture and experience so that they can draw upon background knowledge.

Practical Suggestions: Cultural Contextualization and Adaptation of the Curriculum

Cultural contextualization is a balancing act. It is clear from contextualization research that when our texts and discussions are situated in a local context, they are more meaningful (Ross, 1983, Cordova and Lepper, 1996). On one hand, we want students to be
successful on the national exams, and therefore we need to teach the national curriculum. On the other, we want students to be able to draw on their background knowledge (which is mostly situated in their local culture) to incorporate new knowledge to already existing schema. Schraw, Flowerday, and Lehman’s (2001) suggestion is to “use texts that students know about.” At first, you will probably need to situate texts, lectures, and vocabulary presentations within the students’ own culture. This is what brought me success in the English for Islamic Studies class, when I adapted my lessons to teach about topics of concern to students’ own lives. As student’s gain more language skills, you can move to teaching using texts and vocabulary that address the needs of the national curriculum. For more culturally-loaded texts, you will need to explicitly teach the aspects of culture that are unfamiliar by providing pre-reading background information.

In order to contextualize the curriculum, you must know the students’ sociocultural background. For instance, if many students are from families of farmers, an example sentence should be “Rudy’s father plants rice.” rather than “Rudy’s father goes to the office.” You should also keep an awareness that every class is unique – this helps teachers to be willing to review the curriculum at anytime they find it necessary. Though it may create more work for us to adjust the curriculum to anticipate students’ needs, it is not a waste of time compared to the many hours spent teaching ineffective classes when we insist on applying identical curricula to all classes. In addition, the anticipation that every class is unique can give us the pleasure of expecting different learning situations, and can prevent our teaching jobs from becoming boring. In this way the curriculum serves students more in their learning processes in the classroom as students are put as the dominant factor in the design of curriculum.

What is the best resource in identifying student’s sociocultural background, needs, and uniqueness? Of course, it is the students themselves! Teachers should negotiate with students how to change the classroom situation for the sake of learning. In order to encourage more students to openly express what they think of the learning situations in the classrooms, teachers can always provide time in the beginning of the class for students to reflect on their learning experiences in the previous classes and at the end of the class to collect ideas of what learning materials they want to bring to classrooms for the next meeting. Through students’ reflection, teachers learn how they think the teaching went. Especially when teachers encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences, teachers will be able to gain more insights on the needs of students and to change the situation of learning in the classroom by choosing classroom activities that best suit students preferences. Meanwhile, by openly discussing the learning objectives and by asking openly what learning materials students like to bring to class, teachers position themselves more as facilitators of learning than as the sole provider of knowledge. Though it may sound ridiculous for us teachers to involve students in preparing what to learn in classrooms, as many of us regard this process as exclusively the teacher’s responsibility, it will instill the feeling of responsibility to students for their own learning based on the materials they agreed upon. Furthermore, this can also be a good strategy to cope with the boredom students may feel when teachers use
same old materials again and again, especially when they compare this to the plentiful interesting learning materials they can find on the internet.

Conclusion

Based on the vignettes from our teaching experiences mentioned above, we have identified two major ideas about how to adopt a more student-centered approach: planning lessons that encourage student interest, and adapting the curriculum to meet student’s needs. While we treated each topic under a separate heading, the reader may have noticed that the research and practical suggestions were quite similar throughout the article. In truth, establishing a student-centered approach does not rely solely on the implementation of one new teaching method or style; it is a shift to focusing on student’s needs and building the entire curriculum and educational situation around them. The many interrelated ideas presented in this article will each bring educators one step closer to meaningful student-centered pedagogy. Ultimately, though, the successful implementation of this new style of education will depend on each individual educator and their individual students. It will be an on-going process of negotiation and learning for each party, and its ultimate goal will be increased student learning. We wish you luck and success as you begin your journey towards this very worthy goal.

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