

THE LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH TO DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ SPEAKING SKILLS: A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

Irgashev Ma’ruf Erkin o’g’li

Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, master’s student

E-mail: mirgashev33@gmail.com, +998 93 650 48 88

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Abstract. Speaking remains one of the most difficult skills for foreign-language learners to master, and traditional teacher-centered instruction often provides too few opportunities for genuine oral practice. This article reviews the theoretical and methodological foundations of the learner-centered approach and examines why it is particularly suited to the development of speaking skills. Drawing on established work in second language acquisition and language pedagogy — including communicative competence theory (Canale & Swain, 1980), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and learner-centred curriculum theory (Nunan, 1988) — it argues that speaking proficiency develops most effectively through meaningful, collaborative communication in low-anxiety environments. The article also considers affective factors such as motivation and language anxiety, and discusses implications for English language teaching in Uzbekistan. It is conceptual in nature and does not report new empirical data.

Keywords: learner-centered approach, speaking skills, communicative competence, second language acquisition, English language teaching.

Annotatsiya. Gapirish chet tilini o’rganuvchilar uchun eng murakkab ko’nikmalardan biri bo’lib qolmoqda, an’anaviy o’qituvchi markazli ta’lim esa ko’pincha haqiqiy og’zaki amaliyot uchun yetarli imkoniyat bermaydi. Ushbu maqolada talabaga yo’naltirilgan yondashuvning nazariy va metodologik asoslari ko’rib chiqiladi hamda uning gapirish ko’nikmalarini rivojlantirishga nima uchun ayniqsa mos kelishi tahlil qilinadi. Maqola nazariy xarakterga ega bo’lib, yangi empirik ma’lumotlarni keltirmaydi.

Kalit so’zlar: talabaga yo’naltirilgan yondashuv, gapirish ko’nikmalari, kommunikativ kompetensiya, ikkinchi tilni egallash, ingliz tili o’qitish.

Аннотация. Говорение остаётся одним из самых сложных навыков для изучающих иностранный язык, а традиционное обучение, ориентированное на учителя, часто предоставляет слишком мало возможностей для подлинной устной практики. В статье рассматриваются теоретические и методологические основы лично-ориентированного подхода и анализируется, почему он особенно подходит для развития навыков говорения. Автор утверждает, что навыки говорения наиболее эффективно развиваются через осмысленное, совместное общение в условиях низкой тревожности. Статья носит концептуальный характер и не содержит новых эмпирических данных.

Ключевые слова: лично-ориентированный подход, навыки говорения, коммуникативная компетенция, овладение вторым языком, преподавание английского языка.

1. Introduction

The ability to speak a foreign language fluently and appropriately is widely regarded as the central goal of language learning, yet it is also the skill that learners find most difficult to acquire. In

Uzbekistan, the importance of foreign-language proficiency has been recognised at the level of national policy: Presidential Decree No. PQ-1875 of 10 December 2012, “On measures to further improve the system of teaching foreign languages,” initiated wide-ranging reforms intended to move language education toward communicative, practical outcomes, and Decree No. PQ-5117 of 19 May 2021 reaffirmed this direction. Despite these commitments, classroom practice in many schools and academic lyceums continues to rely on teacher-centered methods in which the teacher dominates classroom talk and learners have few opportunities to produce extended speech.

This gap between policy aspirations and classroom reality raises an important pedagogical question: what kind of instruction most effectively develops learners’ speaking skills? This article argues that the learner-centered approach offers a coherent and theoretically well-grounded answer. The discussion is organised as follows. First, the theoretical foundations of learner-centered education are outlined. Second, the nature of speaking and the construct of communicative competence are examined. Third, the article explains why a learner-centered orientation is particularly appropriate for speaking development. Fourth, the affective dimensions of speaking are considered. Finally, implications for the Uzbek context are discussed. The article is a conceptual review; it synthesises existing theory and research rather than reporting new empirical findings.

2. Theoretical foundations of the learner-centered approach

The learner-centered approach represents a shift away from instruction in which the teacher is the primary source of knowledge toward an orientation in which learners are active participants who construct understanding through engagement, interaction and reflection. Weimer (2002) characterises this shift in terms of five interrelated changes: the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility for learning, the purposes and processes of assessment, and the balance of power in the classroom. In a learner-centered classroom the teacher becomes a facilitator who designs opportunities for learning rather than a transmitter who simply delivers information.

This orientation is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher mental functions originate in social interaction and that learners can perform, with the assistance of more capable peers or teachers, at a level beyond what they could reach alone — a space he termed the zone of proximal development. From this perspective, learning is fundamentally social, and collaboration is not merely a motivational device but a mechanism of cognitive development. Applied to language teaching, Nunan (1988) developed the notion of the learner-centred curriculum, in which decisions about content and method are informed by learners’ needs and learners are gradually given greater responsibility for, and awareness of, their own learning.

Within language pedagogy, these principles are most clearly expressed in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Richards and Rodgers (2014) describe CLT as an approach that treats communicative competence rather than grammatical knowledge as the goal of instruction, emphasises meaning over form, and gives a central place to interaction and authentic language use. TBLT, as articulated by Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996), organises instruction around tasks — activities with a primary focus on meaning, a communicative outcome, and a gap that learners must bridge using their own linguistic resources. Both approaches embody the learner-centered conviction that language is learned through use rather than through the accumulation of rules alone.

3. The nature of speaking and communicative competence

Speaking is a complex, real-time skill. Bygate (1987) distinguishes between knowledge of the language and the skill of using that knowledge under the pressures of real communication, noting

that fluent speech requires the speaker to plan, articulate and monitor utterances almost simultaneously. Unlike writing, speaking allows little time for revision and depends heavily on context, intonation and interaction with an interlocutor. Thornbury (2005) emphasises that effective speaking instruction must therefore move learners beyond controlled, scripted practice toward genuine, autonomous production in which they make their own choices about what to say and how to say it.

The goal of such instruction is best understood through the construct of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed an influential model in which communicative competence comprises grammatical competence (knowledge of vocabulary and the rules of the language), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use language appropriately in context), and strategic competence (the ability to compensate for gaps in knowledge through paraphrase, clarification requests and similar strategies); discourse competence, the ability to produce coherent connected speech, was subsequently added to the model. This framework makes clear that accurate grammar alone is insufficient: a competent speaker must also know how to use language appropriately, organise discourse and sustain communication when difficulties arise. Instruction that concentrates exclusively on grammatical accuracy therefore addresses only one component of the competence that learners actually need in order to communicate.

4. Why a learner-centered approach suits speaking development

Several well-established theoretical positions converge to explain why a learner-centered, communicative orientation is particularly effective for developing speaking. The first concerns the quantity and quality of practice. In teacher-fronted classrooms the teacher typically holds the floor for most of the lesson and individual learners speak only briefly. Long and Porter (1985) demonstrated that group and pair work substantially increase the amount of learner talk and, importantly, improve its quality: in peer interaction learners initiate more, produce a wider range of language functions, and take more conversational risks than in interaction dominated by the teacher.

The second position concerns the role of interaction itself. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis holds that acquisition is promoted when communication problems lead interlocutors to negotiate meaning — to seek clarification, confirm understanding and reformulate utterances. Such negotiation makes input comprehensible and draws learners' attention to the relationship between form and meaning. Learner-centered activities built around genuine information gaps and collaborative problem-solving create precisely the conditions in which negotiation of meaning occurs naturally.

A third position concerns production. Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis argues that comprehensible input, while necessary, is not sufficient for acquisition: learners must also be pushed to produce language, because the effort of producing output forces them to process language syntactically, to notice gaps in their knowledge, and to test hypotheses about how the language works. Activities such as discussions, debates, role-plays and presentations — characteristic of learner-centered classrooms — require exactly this kind of pushed, extended output. Taken together, these positions suggest that speaking develops not primarily through explanation about the language but through structured opportunities to use it for real communicative purposes.

5. Affective dimensions of speaking

Speaking is not only a cognitive and linguistic activity but also an emotional one. Because speaking exposes learners to immediate evaluation by teachers and peers, it is especially vulnerable to anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) identified foreign language anxiety as a distinct form

of situational anxiety that can significantly impair performance and lead learners to avoid speaking altogether. A learner-centered classroom, with its emphasis on collaboration, tolerance of error and a supportive atmosphere, is well placed to reduce this anxiety by allowing learners to rehearse and take risks in the relatively low-pressure setting of pair and small-group work before performing for a larger audience.

Closely related is the question of motivation. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) proposes that intrinsic motivation is fostered when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Learner-centered instruction addresses all three — it grants learners choice and responsibility (autonomy), provides graded opportunities to experience success (competence), and builds a collaborative community (relatedness). The construct of willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998) brings these strands together, modelling the readiness to enter into communication as the product of both linguistic confidence and situational and affective factors. Instruction that lowers anxiety and raises confidence can therefore be expected to increase learners’ willingness to speak, which in turn generates further practice.

6. Implications for the Uzbek context

The theoretical case outlined above has clear implications for English language teaching in Uzbekistan, where, despite supportive national policy, teacher-centered practice remains common. A first implication is that lessons should be reorganised so that a substantial proportion of class time is devoted to learner speech, primarily through pair and group work, rather than to extended teacher explanation. A second is that activities should be designed around genuine communicative purposes — information gaps, opinion exchange, problem-solving and projects — rather than mechanical repetition. A third is that assessment should give due weight to oral, communicative performance, since assessment strongly shapes what is taught and learned.

Realising these changes is not without challenge. Large classes, examination pressure, limited resources and learners’ prior experience of teacher-centered instruction can all impede the adoption of communicative methods. The literature on teacher development suggests that such changes are most likely to succeed when teachers receive sustained professional support rather than one-off training, when they are given some flexibility in how they deliver the curriculum, and when innovation is introduced gradually. None of these obstacles undermines the theoretical case for a learner-centered approach; rather, they indicate that effective implementation requires attention to the conditions under which teachers work.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued, on the basis of established theory and research, that the learner-centered approach is particularly well suited to the development of speaking skills. Speaking is a complex real-time skill whose mastery requires not isolated grammatical knowledge but the integrated communicative competence described by Canale and Swain (1980), and that competence is built through use. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) and the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) together explain why interaction-rich, learner-centered classrooms provide the conditions under which speaking develops, while research on anxiety and motivation explains why such classrooms also support the affective conditions for sustained practice.

For Uzbekistan, where reform of foreign-language education is an explicit national priority, these conclusions point toward a clear direction: classrooms in which learners speak more, interact more, and use English for genuine purposes. The argument advanced here is conceptual, and it

would benefit from empirical investigation in local classrooms; designing and conducting such studies is an important task for future research. What the existing theory and research already make clear, however, is that placing the learner at the centre of instruction is not a fashionable slogan but a principled response to what is known about how speaking is learned.

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