

# modernenglishteacher

Bringing the latest research to your classroom



Litera Trading Inc.  
[literatrading@gmail.com](mailto:literatrading@gmail.com)

## Learner-centred approaches

■ Predicting ■ Rapport ■ Infographics ■ Grammar ■ Listening ■ Pronunciation  
 ■ Accuracy/fluency ■ Yoga ■ Poetry ■ Making decisions ■ Reading

■ Leslie Forrest ■ Richard Cauldwell ■ Josh Kurzweil ■ Laura Hadwin ■ Kat Robb  
 ■ Jennifer Yates ■ Craig Thaine ■ Daniel Xerri ■ Simon Carruthers ■ Eun Seon Chung





# Contents

## Editorial

### 3 A note from the editor

## Learner-centred approaches

### 4 A round table on learner-centred approaches

*Robert McLarty* leads a discussion on this important topic.

### 6 Power to the learner

*Kat Robb* suggests how teachers and learners can benefit by switching the focus.

### 8 A learner-centred approach

*Nick Michelioudakis* describes where and when he uses it.

## Methodology

### 10 Small teaching: predicting

*Hall Houston* and *Andrew Starck* discuss aspects of small teaching in the first of a series.

## Teaching listening

### 13 Listening – beware the smiling-class imperative

*Richard Cauldwell* introduces two factors which are preventing students from improving their listening skills.

### 16 Stop press! Using effective listening strategies in Academic English

*Naheen Madarbakus-Ring* describes her approach to teaching listening skills.

## In my opinion

### 20 Off the mat and into the classroom

*Laura Hadwin* reflects on the transferability of yoga to English teaching.

### 24 Exercise as a form of professional support

*Daniel Xerri* describes the need to encourage teachers to keep both physically and mentally fit.

## Teaching grammar

### 27 Grammar tap

*Josh Kurzweil* describes a way of helping students practise and remember key structures.

## Learning difficulties

### 30 Supporting learners with dyslexia in the ESL classroom

*Jennifer Yates* looks at an area of concern to many learners and teachers.

## Teaching reading

### 34 Better reading for learners

*Craig Thaine* revisits some of the traditional views on improving reading skills.

### 38 They need to read

*Linda M Hanington* and *Willy A Renandya* put into action their beliefs about extensive reading.

## Classroom research

### 42 Developing oral skills through poetry

*Eun Seon Chung* describes a research project she is planning with young learners based around poetry.

## Speaking

### 46 Balancing accuracy and fluency

*Thu Tran* suggests ways of getting clear outcomes from oral communication classes.

### 51 The beauty of the interdental fricative

*Simon Carruthers* explains why learning a language is not only about communication.

## In my opinion

### 53 To teach or not to teach poetry in the ESL classroom

*Mohamed Yacoub* argues passionately about the benefits of writing poetry in class.

## Exam preparation

### 59 Chinese students: how they cope with IELTS Speaking & Writing

*Austin Liu* describes their results and some potential solutions.

## Professional development

### 62 Teacher developing four years on

*Mark Rooney* and *Catherine Thorpe* show how their programme has succeeded over the last four years.

### 65 Reflecting on our experience

*Ekaterina Arshavskaya* describes the use of the MBTI personality test with her learners.

## Practical ideas

### 67 Exploiting infographics

*Lucas Kohnke* and *Billy Chan* suggest a more creative approach to writing.

## Business English

### 69 Using SWOT in Business English training

*Ben Dobbs* suggests ways of using this analytical tool in the classroom.

## Professional development

### 71 10 things you can do with a decision

*Keith Harding* describes the importance of this key skill.

## Speaking

### 73 The importance of rapport in the classroom

*Leslie Forrest* suggests ways to build, maintain and renew it.

## Business English

### 76 The importance of English

*Aloysius Clement* and *Murugavel Thanikachalam* report on a study in India.

## Reviews

### 80 Reviews

*Roger Gower*

### A book I've used

- 81 Solutions Advanced (3rd edition) *Wayne Rimmer*
- 82 Unlock – Basic Literacy *Sandee Thompson*
- 83 From Rules to Reasons *Ben Naismith*
- 84 ETpedia: Materials Writing *Brian Brennan*

### Background books

- 85 Best Practices for Blended Learning *Anthea Fester*
- 86 Second Language Pragmatics *Rory O'Kane*
- 88 Summary of books reviewed
- 88 What's new



# A round table on learner-centred approaches

**Robert McLarty** leads a discussion on this important topic.

## What do you understand by a learner-centred approach to ELT?

**AL** In a learner-centred approach, we are encouraging students to take control of their own learning. This may entail 'learning to learn', developing good classroom skills to give students more autonomy over their language-learning journey. On top of that, it entails drawing on the students' own interests and experience to choose lesson topics or to guide discussions. Lessons where the topics are chosen or suggested by the learners are bound to be more engaging.

**JH** I agree. It often begins with the teacher taking an approach involving guided discovery, an inductive approach if you prefer with an emphasis on developing learner autonomy. Developing learner autonomy in this way helps them become less dependent

on the teacher and more able to make their own decisions about learning, particularly how to practise outside the classroom. It's also about putting the student at the centre of the learning rather than a pre-defined syllabus: finding out about them as people and their personal goals.

**DG** In fact, any teaching situation where the learners have a major say in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they will measure their own success. The teacher is a guide and facilitator rather than omniscient leader.

**RM** The guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage. It's quite difficult to do all the time – certain activities need the teacher to be in charge – giving instructions, sorting out misunderstandings, correcting, although even correction can be done in a learner-centred way particularly if students get used to correcting each other.

## So are there any obvious drawbacks?

**AL** One of the biggest problems is that some students, especially younger ones, don't actually have a lot of life experience to draw on. So when the teacher asks the students to provide materials, the students have no idea of what to bring to class. Although having said that, asking them to pick photos or music from their smartphones shouldn't be difficult and, again, this would encourage them to talk about their own experiences. That's bound to be more interesting for them than describing someone else's photos!

Older students, on the other hand, will have a great deal of life experience to draw on which can lead to long, interesting discussions. Unfortunately, there is another pitfall here for an inexperienced teacher. He or she may end each lesson feeling satisfied at the extended speaking activity that the class have completed, only to discover at the end of the course that the students complain in their feedback that 'all we did was talk'.

**JH** That's right. In certain classroom contexts, it might be interpreted as the teacher not doing their job. The teacher who relies too much on input from the class could be perceived as unprepared. In the worst case scenarios, it can also mean a lack of guidance for the student, and the teacher not intervening when





# A learner-centred approach

**Nick Michelioudakis** describes where and when he uses it.

**D**o you want a 'chef' or a 'tailor'?

These days I mostly teach one-to-one and I am often struck by the attitude of many of my adult learners. Serious professionals as most of them are, their approach to the lessons can often be summed up in a simple sentence: 'Here I am – teach me.'

This is why the first thing I do with a new student is explain to them that I see my job as less like that of a chef and more like that of a tailor. Unless the student gives me some information about what their language needs are, what their current level is as well as what their learning preferences are, the result is likely to be disappointing. I think this also captures the way I see a learner-centred approach to ELT in general.

The term learner-centred approach (LCA for short) can be interpreted in a number of ways of course. One of these is the DOGME approach which starts with the question 'What does the learner want to say?'. This lies at the extreme end of 'learner-centredness'; at the other extreme there is the cursory needs analysis at the beginning of the course, followed by business as usual. The way I see things is that our starting point should not be 'What do I have to teach?' or 'What does the typical learner (at this level) need to know?' or 'How do I teach Unit 6 in my coursebook?', but rather questions like 'What does this learner already know?' / 'What do they hope to achieve?' / 'What do they need?' / 'How do they prefer to learn?'. Essentially, it means that we should make an attempt to tailor what we do to the needs of the learner and to their learning preferences. Obviously, this is easier to do in one-to-one classes.

With a learner-centred approach there are three obvious drawbacks.

1. Different learners have different needs – and different ways in which they prefer to learn (but not 'styles' – see Willingham, 2009: chapter 7). If we have to teach a group of learners, it might be hard to come up with content and activities which will be suitable for everyone in the group. This should not prevent us from trying, however.
2. Trying to discover the learners' level of English, learning needs and preferences is in itself a labour-intensive activity (and one which some institutions conveniently overlook; if you want to do your job properly as a teacher, you may need to do all this in your own time).
3. Very often people do not know what they need, so they cannot tell us. For instance, adult learners often say they need grammar, while in fact they might need vocabulary or work on fluency (the following phrase used by Psychologists and Market Researchers captures this perfectly: 'Don't ask – can't tell' 😊 [see Graves, 2013]).

I feel that an LCA works best with in-service professionals who are well aware of the kind of situations they might need English in, so they can help the teacher structure a programme which will hopefully be beneficial for them (at the very least it will look like it is addressing their needs – and perceptions matter a great deal! [Ross & Nisbett, 2011: 8]). Another factor is

the learner's personality; an LCA may also be more suitable for independent learners who like to be in control of the way they learn. This is not to say that we cannot try to train our learners to be more independent, but that takes time.

I actually believe that an LCA makes most sense in the context of self-study. I feel that the best way to implement an LCA is to show learners a number of learning strategies, so they can choose for themselves the one that suits them best. I like to offer my students a range of self-study activities either online or as apps. I feel that my adult students should decide for themselves what it is they want to do, when, where and how, but I said above I do appreciate that 'getting students to become self-directed learners can be quite a challenge. It is one thing to do things at the gym with the instructor telling you what to do and how; it is quite another to motivate yourself to pick up that skipping rope at home' (Michelioudakis, 2017).

In class, I would say that activities fall within a spectrum from completely teacher-led ones to ones controlled by the learners. Examples of the latter are projects where students decide for themselves what it is they would like to work on, who would do what, how they would like to present their work, etc. Here the teacher needs to walk a fine line between giving full autonomy to the learners (with all its motivational potential – see Pink, 2010: chapter 4]) and the risk of the latter becoming overwhelmed (hence the need for 'scaffolding' [ibid: 107]).



# Listening – beware the smiling-class imperative

**Richard Cauldwell** introduces two factors which are preventing students from improving their listening skills.

**L**istening lags behind the other skills. Learners who are justly proud of their abilities in speaking, reading and writing are often dismayed when they find that their listening skills are not up to the same level. This situation is created by a number of obstacles in how we teach listening, of which I describe two: 'the smiling-class imperative' and 'lack of knowledge of the Jungle'. The first obstacle is methodological and the second obstacle has to do with a lack of knowledge about how normal speech works – and in particular how it sounds to learners.

## Teacher training

Why do we teach listening in the way that we do? When we enter the ELT profession, we enter a world of knowledge, skills and classroom practices that have been established for a long time. We are trained to fit in with the standards of the particular ELT environment that we work in, whether this be a publicly funded school system or a private language school.

As we receive our initial training, and begin to form our professional identity, we develop our confidence in ourselves as teachers and we gain mastery over the key areas of our professional work. These areas include knowledge of the language, knowledge of how to handle classrooms full of students, and knowledge of how language learning happens. With our initial and continuing education, together

with the repertoire of 'activities which work' that we learn from our colleagues, we become acculturated to the profession. We adopt its norms, beliefs and practices – 'the knowledge' of the profession, which of course includes how to teach listening.

Some of the things that we learn, some of the 'good-teacher behaviours' are, however, obstacles to the effective teaching of listening, one of them being 'the smiling-class imperative'.

## Obstacle no. 1 – the smiling-class imperative

When I started teaching, my greatest fear was to run out of material long before the end of the class, and to be faced with filling time with nothing to teach. My greatest wish was to be liked by my class – I wanted them to think I was a good teacher, and I would judge whether or not this was the case by the amount of smiling and the level of energy in the classroom.

I quickly developed the habit of allowing activities that were going well to last longer than I had originally planned. As far as listening was concerned, the pre-listening phase – with its enjoyable communicative contextualisations – worked well for me, so I was content to stay in this phase longer than was (as I look back now) useful. This had the wonderful advantage of reducing the amount of time available for the more uncomfortable parts of the listening

lesson: the while-listening and post-listening parts. I was not alone in doing this (Field 1998: 83) notes that there 'is a tendency by practitioners to over-extend' the pre-listening phase.

When the time came for the while-listening phase, my class suddenly changed from being a happy social group into a group of frowning isolated individuals (cf. Field, 1998: 14) often horrified (cf. Thorn, 2009: 8), and I did not like this transformation, feeling that it was my fault that they were not looking happy. The smiling-class imperative then kicked in: 'Oh my goodness they're not smiling, I must do something else.' I therefore moved on quickly – after checking the answers – to the next activity: a discussion, or a coursebook-based writing or reading activity.

## The smiling-class imperative as a legitimate avoidance strategy

This avoidance strategy was given legitimacy by one of the values of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This value is that of the ideal sight and sound of an active cheerful class of learners: preferably smiling, visibly busy doing something. This imperative gave me a professionally acceptable reason for avoiding confronting the difficulties of decoding – I could stick with the jolly, the social, the motivating; I could avoid frowns, struggles, difficulties. This value is, I hasten to add, a virtuous one, but it is over-applied: it is 'a good thing' to