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Investigating the Effect of a Learning-Centered Instruction on Non-English Major Students’ Attitudes toward English Course

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Abstract

The present study aims at exploring the effect of a Learner-Centered Instruction on non-English major students’ attitude toward academic English course. Based on a pedagogical framework driven from Hutchinson and Waters’ Learning-Centered approach for language instruction, it was assumed that such an approach would be more successful in changing students’ attitude leading them to a better achievement through encouraging the use of effective skills and considering the learners’ role throughout the instruction. Therefore, 30 students were selected as an intact experimental group. Following a pretest, treatment, and a posttest, the obtained data was analyzed using t-test to examine the effect of instruction on students’ attitudes toward English course. The results indicated that students who receive a learning-centered instruction, as opposed to teacher-oriented methods, express positive attitude toward English course.

Keywords: Learning-centered instruction; attitude; English course

1. Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) came into existence as an approach employed in tertiary education institutions mainly focusing on curriculum and instruction in contrast to analysis and theory (Hyland, 2006). Thus, an EAP course can provide a valuable opportunity to implement effective teaching approaches and materials to compensate for students’ shortcomings in a specific area.

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EAP is a part of EFL instruction in Iran and enjoys a crucial position in the higher education. All undergraduate students majoring in various fields of studies have to pass EAP as a compulsory course subject (Moslemi et al., 2011). Certainly, reading has been regarded as the most required EAP skill in students ‘tertiary education (Jordan, 1997). In a similar vein, the main objective of EAP courses in Iran is developing reading comprehension of students to read academic texts in their specialty area (Erfani et al., 2011; Farhadi et al., 2010; Hayati, 2008). Although remarkable educational and financial investments have been made on EAP programs, the majority of students and many teachers are not satisfied with these so-called EAP classes (Eslami, 2010). Among many influential factors leading to inefficiency of EAP courses, teacher and teaching methodology is of a great concern. According to Hayati (2008), EAP classes lack skillful and innovative teachers who can implement communicative approaches in the classroom. What is noteworthy here is that the dominant methodology in EAP context is still traditional Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) practiced in teacher-centered classes which is quite outdated and not efficient in developing reading comprehension ability of students which in turn leads to the dissatisfaction of both learners and teachers with these EAP courses (Ajideh, 2009; Atai, 2011; Erfani et al., 2011; Farhadi et al., 2010; Hayati, 2008; Mazdayasna & Tahririan 2008).

Therefore, it could be hoped that a course which concentrates on three main factors of meeting specific needs of the learners, making use of the underlying methodologies of the discipline it serves, as well as focusing on the appropriate skills necessary for this purpose will help the learners to succeed in their goals. This study builds on previous research studies emphasizing the role of instruction on study skills and techniques in English classes. However, it introduces Hutchinson and Waters’ (1987) learning-centered approach as an innovative approach into English reading classroom in tertiary education and EAP context of Iran. In contrast to teacher-centered GTM classes, this approach takes into account learners’ needs and priorities throughout the learning and teaching process and aims to consider learner at the center of learning.

1.1. Learning-centered instruction

Learning-centered approach has been introduced by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) as a reaction to teacher-oriented language-centered approach focusing merely on teaching structural and grammatical patterns of language and neglecting the potential factors and barriers in language learning on learners’ side. As a major work on ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 128-130) have mentioned eight basic rules for a learning-centered methodology in ESP context.

First of all, they highlight the developmental process of second language learning drawing attention to the role of learners’ background knowledge and teachers’ efforts in using it to pave the way for learning new information. Next, they express that, in addition to having the required knowledge, learners need to participate actively in the learning process by means of utilizing that knowledge both as a mental and physical process. As the third rule, they mention the decision-making nature of language learning which relies on learner decisions. Then, as a major barrier in language learning in ESP context, they point out the mismatch between learners’ cognitive maturity in contrast to their linguistic immaturity in the second language. As the fifth rule, the role of native language knowledge is emphasized in second language learning to make learners improve in learning a second language. The sixth principle takes into account the role of emotions in learning necessitating teachers to develop positive emotions in the classroom and prevent negative emotions as much as possible. For example through applying pair work and group work, giving students time to think emphasizing more on process rather than product, respecting attitude the same as ability and considering interest in the course teachers can trigger positive emotions. As the seventh principle, they explain that language learning has an incidental nature meaning that language learning does not take place by working on a language problem, but it happens incidentally while thinking to something else. The language problems should make the learners employ language and then arrange the language in their mind. The last rule considers the unsystematic process of language learning. Although we learn through arranging information in a systematic manner, learning only takes place based on an internally-created system and the external system may pave the way, but does not guarantee learning.

Finally, they distinguish the learning-centered approach from the learner-centered approach. Learning is completely identified by the learner in learner-centered approach; however, the context in which learning happens
and the negotiation of learners and society should be also taken into account. Therefore, although learning is an internal process which takes place in the learner’s mind, the possible external impacts that may influence the learning process should not be neglected.

2. Method

This study is an action research conducted by the teacher during the instruction period to examine if a learning-centered instruction has any significant effect on students’ attitudes toward English course. To do so, an intact group pre-test post-test design was adopted.

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 30 freshmen electronic engineering students which formed an intact class. Those students were chosen by means of a three part questionnaire and a pre-test, being homogeneous in terms of their age range, reading comprehension ability, and motivational features.

2.2. Instruments

A self-report Likert scale items questionnaire, devised by the researcher, was applied in this study to examine the possible change in students’ attitudes toward English course after implementation of the treatment. It was given to the students at the beginning of the study as a pre-test and at the end of the study as a post-test.

2.3. Procedure

The study started at the beginning of the academic semester. The participants formed an English class that was held two sessions (approximately 90 minutes) a week. The class was an intact group taught through a learning-centered approach for six weeks. In the beginning, the questionnaire was given to the learners as the pre-test in order to compare any probable change, if any, in their attitudes before and after the treatment. Then, the experiment was conducted.

The treatment involved a learning-centered method of instruction, as proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) which considers learners’ needs, interests, existing and required learning skills to reach the desired target defined as successful reading comprehension in the curriculum. The teacher followed the principles of learning-centered approach throughout the course disapproving teacher-centered approaches and considering learner’s role in all stages of learning and teaching as an important factor in determining learning process. The instruction encompassed reading micro-skills instruction, pair work and group work, giving students time to think emphasizing, respecting attitude the same as ability and considering interest in the course. This action research aimed to see if such an approach can change students’ attitudes toward English courses since many students are reluctant to attend English classes due to the inefficiency of these courses in improving reading comprehension of students as claimed by Hayati (2008).

3. Results

In order to analyze the obtained data, t-test was used to measure the possible effect of the method on the student's English course attitudes. To test the proposed assumption, the author used paired t-test with the intact group taking method of instruction as independent variable and attitude as the dependent one. The results of t-test revealed that the teaching intervention had a significant effect ($T = -6.50, P \leq .05$) on students’ attitude (Table 1). This means that the instruction was quite successful in improving students’ attitude toward English course.
Table 1. The results of $t$-test for English course attitude

| Pairs           | Mean | df | t   | Sig. |
|-----------------|------|----|-----|------|
| Pretest-Posttest| -4.70| 29 | -6.50 | .00  |

$P \leq .05$

As the comparison of the means within the group (Table 2) shows, there is a difference between pre-test (as far as reading $M = 32.15$) and post-test ($M = 36.85$). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics means and standard deviation across the pairs as far as the attitude is concerned. Figure 2 represents the mean comparison of pairs. It shows that the means of the intact group for pre-test and post-test are clearly different. In other words, students’ initial attitude toward English improved as a result of receiving learner-centered instruction.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the post-test scores

| Pair   | Mean  | SD  | N  |
|--------|-------|-----|----|
| Pretest| 32.15 | 4.05| 30 |
| Posttest| 36.85 | 3.99| 30 |

4. Discussion

This research study aims to draw teachers’ attention to the importance of learning-centered approaches and the significance of methodology other than syllabus design and evaluation (Watson Todd, 2003) in EAP context.

The results of the present study imply that a learning-centered approach can improve students’ attitude toward English courses due to the fact that they find their reading comprehension developed as the result of an effective instruction. The present study adds to the previous body of research carried out on the role of innovative instruction in academic contexts (e.g. Ajideh, 2009; Atai, 2011; Hayati, 2008). It encourages the implementation of a learning-centered approach in EAP courses as opposed to teacher-centered GTM classes. It approves the implementation of all crucial principles of Hutchinson and Waters’ learning-centered approach which encourage the consideration of learner and his or her preferences and needs along the learning process.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study supports the fact that teachers may have to devote sometime to ensure that their students correctly understand and accept the daily routines of a learning-centered methodology. The current study highlights the crucial effect of such instruction on developing subjects' attitudes toward academic English courses; however, the findings call attention to some issues to be considered in further research. This study, in an action research format, mainly focused on an intact group and one method of instruction and its effects on developing undergraduate electronic engineering students’ attitudes toward English courses; further research might investigate the possible effects of such an approach on students English proficiency, reading comprehension and academic achievement with different levels of motivation and in different fields of studies.

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