Student-centered education: an analysis of the perception of classroom management and teacher behavior among Vietnamese ESL students.

Dr. Yohann Brultey
Hong Bang International University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Abstract

This article investigates the perception that young Vietnamese ESL students have of the student-centered classroom management in use at Apollo, a leading ESL-teaching company. For many years now, the field of education has been dominated by a discourse highlighting the benefits of student-centered learning, and by extension, the development of more student-centered classroom management. Vietnam, along with many other Southeastern Asian countries, mainly offers in its schools a teacher-centered form of education. On the other hand, Apollo and other foreign-owned ESL companies claim they offer an experience centered on their young students. Through a survey of 65 Apollo students aged 9 to 11, this research analyzes how young Vietnamese students perceive the student-centered EFL classroom compared with their regular Vietnamese school, and demonstrates that students have a clear awareness of multiple aspects of classroom management that can directly affect their academic and emotional development. While in general students enjoy their experience in the traditional and the ESL classroom at the same rate, they clearly value the student-centered classroom for helping them feel safer, more self-confident, and more cared for.

1. Introduction, definitions and theoretical framework

For many years now, the field of education has been debating the value and the benefits "student-centered learning," also known as "student-focused teaching." As early as the nineties, educational psychologist John Darling [1] concluded that "Child-Centered Pedagogy," as he called it, had a very positive impact on learning. Multiple studies have since reached the conclusion that student-centered learning allowed for better performances, general satisfaction in students, and a reduction in the amount of violence and tension created in the classroom, such as the ones from Jones [2] and VanHousen [3]. In order to understand more concretely how student-centered learning can be implemented, it is necessary to question and analyze what is one of the core aspects of student-centered learning: the way teachers build their classroom management.

While no clear specific guidelines define what "student-centered classroom management" is, there are a number of recurring ideas in contemporary research—among other, the responsibility of students in their own learning, an awareness of the reasons why they come to class, a mutual respect and the use of collaborative work, the perception of the teacher as a helper/guide more than as a threat, and the need for the teacher to pay attention to students' input, as can be found in the research of Dollar [4], Brown [5], Kohn [6], McCombs and Miller [7], Kerdikoshvili [8], and VanHousen [3].

1.1 The situation in Vietnam

When it comes to Vietnam, recent research by Phan [9] and Habok and Nguyen [10] shows that local classrooms and the way they are managed still seem to be rather teacher-centered.

Deena VanHousen [3] concluded in her research that achieving a more student-centered type of teaching required a student-centered classroom management, and that achieving a student-centered classroom management required a strong positive bond between students and teachers: "the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered classroom management is possible only if there are strong positive relationships between the teacher and students as well as, students and their peers. In student-centered classrooms, teachers share responsibilities with students, so having mutual respect for each other is essential" [3]. If the relationship between teacher and students remains a master/apprentice one and responsibilities are not shared between students and teacher, it becomes extremely difficult to build up a more student-centered classroom management, and in the end develop an actual student-centered classroom.

In his aptly titled article "Progressive Education: why it's Hard to Beat, but Also Hard to Find," Alfie Kohn [6] states that "student-centered classroom management is still unusual because it calls for "a willingness to give up some control and let students take some ownership, which requires guts as well as talent." [6] Teachers often do not want to give up control and give students a sense of ownership, as they are afraid it wouldn't be sustainable or that the students wouldn't understand it. Phan Thi Tuyet Nga [9] concludes that even though many teachers claim their approach is student-centered, "findings […] indicate a wide gap […] between what was believed and what was actually implemented by experienced teachers [as they] adopted teacher-centered, GTM-oriented instructions in the classroom." [9] For Habok and Nguyen, a core issue is that the students' beliefs themselves aren't student centered, as "if [the] students' beliefs are not student-centered, they are not ready for autonomous learning. Moreover, teachers need to be well-informed about their roles as facilitators, counselors, and resources in their students' learning process because if teachers keep working as knowledge providers, students themselves will be more likely to stick to teacher-centered beliefs." [10]

The development of student-centered education and classroom management in Vietnamese classrooms seems to be in a rut: neither teachers nor students seem ready to implement the approach due to a lack of familiarity with it and its benefits and a belief that the traditional teacher-centered education is more effective. However, some foreign-owned English-teaching companies have decided to take a different approach.

Leading ESL company Apollo English advertises a "student-focused teaching method" in their young learner classes. When it comes to recruitment, prospective teachers are informed they are expected to "plan communicative, student-centred and participative lessons while

following a designated syllabus." [11] This approach to recruitment is reflected in the fact Apollo prioritizes candidates with a Cambridge CELTA, a leading ESL certificate which approaches teaching from a very student-centered angle.

However, are Apollo students aware of the student-centered approach developed in the company? For this research, a formal qualitative survey was developed in order to collect their impressions. Following the research of Professor of Education R.E. Stake [12] and mixed research specialist John Creswell [13], we believe that qualitative case studies value participants' perspectives and experiences and allows for an exploration of the complex interactions of factors. Through a series of questions related to specific characteristics of that student-centered approach, we wanted to study how they perceived the Apollo student-centered classroom management, and see their awareness of Apollo's attempts to develop a student-centered approach. We also hoped to determine if they observed a clear contrast with their experience at their regular, Vietnamese-managed school, and see what kind of impact it had on indicators of stress and discomfort—do students feel more relaxed, less stressed, more confident, and more eager to learn in the student-centered classroom?

2. Research method

The questionnaire was built around twelve statements that the subjects were invited to evaluate on a scale going from 0 (never) to 3 (always). 70 students, from the age of 8 to 11, were invited to react to the statements both according to their experience at Apollo and at their regular day-school. We avoided using questions in order to limit takers' discomfort at having to provide a "right answer". Through the use of statements based on concrete situations, we believed we could more accurately measure the taker's impressions.

The statements themselves were built around the recurring indicators mentioned by leading specialists in the field when attempting to describe student-centered classroom management, such as Jones [2], VanHousen [3], Dollard [4], Kerdikoshvili [8], Charles [14], Bondy and Ross [15], Soter and Rudge [16], and McCombs [17].

The questionnaire was administered to the students over a span of three weeks by the researcher without the presence of their teachers in the classroom. Vietnamese-speaking teaching assistants were present in case certain items had to be explained, but general understanding of the statement did not appear as a serious issue. Out of 70 questionnaires administered, 65 were deemed valid and 5 were rejected due to the age of the takers or the fact they were incomplete.

3. Results and analysis

Statements	Apollo	School
a- I like to be there.	2.4	2.3
b- I work in pairs and groups with my classmates.	2.1	2.0
c- My teacher is nice, polite, and helps me when I need.	2.9	2.2
d- If I break classroom rules, my teacher gets angry at me.	1.0	1.8
e- I understand why we do the class activities.	2.2	2.4
f- The teacher helps me feel confident when I speak.	2.6	2.1
g- I can be active, participate, and speak in class.	2.2	2.0
h- I am scared of my teacher.	0.4	1.3
i- I feel safe in class and around other students.	2.5	2.2
j- I feel that my teacher speaks too much.	1.2	1.5
k- I feel my teacher cares for me and listens to me.	2.5	2.2
l- I feel the teacher is here to help me learn better.	2.8	2.4

Fig. 1 - Means for all scores, rounded up or down to the closest decimal. All statements evaluated by takers from 0 (never) to 3 (always).

Statements	Apollo	School
a- I like to be there.	3	2
b- I work in pairs and groups with my classmates.	2	2
c- My teacher is nice, polite, and helps me when I need.	3	2
d- If I break classroom rules, my teacher gets angry at me.	1	2
e- I understand why we do the class activities.	2	3
f- The teacher helps me feel confident when I speak.	3	2
g- I can be active, participate, and speak in class.	2	2
h- I am scared of my teacher.	0	1
i- I feel safe in class and around other students.	3	3
j- I feel that my teacher speaks too much.	1	1
k- I feel my teacher cares for me and listens to me.	3	2
l- I feel the teacher is here to help me learn better.	3	3

Fig. 2 - Median for all scores, rounded up or down to the closest decimal. All statements evaluated by takers from 0 (never) to 3 (always).

Statements	Apollo	School
a- I like to be there.	0.84	0.84

b- I work in pairs and groups with my classmates.	0.92	1.07
c- My teacher is nice, polite, and helps me when I need.	0.46	0.98
d- If I break classroom rules, my teacher gets angry at me.	0.98	1.09
e- I understand why we do the class activities.	0.84	0.74
f- The teacher helps me feel confident when I speak.	0.75	0.96
g- I can be active, participate, and speak in class.	0.89	1.00
h- I am scared of my teacher.	1.21	1.09
i- I feel safe in class and around other students.	0.83	0.96
j- I feel that my teacher speaks too much.	1.58	1.21
k- I feel my teacher cares for me and listens to me.	0.71	0.86
l- I feel the teacher is here to help me learn better.	0.44	0.88

Fig. 3 – Standard deviation for all scores, rounded up or down to the closest decimal. All statements evaluated by takers from 0 (never) to 3 (always).

The first observation is that irrespectively of what they have to say about either institution, students generally enjoy attending classes, as showed in the results of question [a] (deviation of 0.80/0.84), and almost always feel safe in class [i] (deviation of 0.83/0.96). It might appear surprising that for both Apollo and their day school, they consider they work in pairs and groups quite often, although a higher deviation for the day school shows more amplitude in the answers, testifying of different practices in different Vietnamese schools [b] (deviation of 0.92/1.07). Very similar results were also observed when it comes to how students felt when it comes to how much they are allowed to be active and participate in class [g] (deviation of 0.89/1.00).

Looking at whether students observe characteristics of the student-centered classroom management, It appears they do, as the Apollo teacher is described as always "nice, polite, and helpful" [c] (very low deviation of 0.46), with scores way higher than for their day school. Students also declare that the Apollo teacher almost always helps them feel confident when they speak [f] (deviation of 0.75), cares for them and listens to them [k] (deviation of 0.71) and is always there to help them learn better [l] (very low deviation of 0.44).

However, while students understand the reasons why class activities are done most of the time [e] (deviation of 0.84/0.74), the higher scores attributed to the Vietnamese day schools could also reveal a certain difficulty to truly grasp the way the student-centered classroom works. Conversely, when asked if they thought that their teacher spoke too much, students attributed higher scores to their day school [j] (deviation of 1.58/1.21) possibly testifying of a certain degree of awareness as to the expectations of the student-centered classroom—however, such an analysis should be mitigated by the high degree of deviation observed in the answers.

Fear and anger in the classroom also seem to be virtually absent from the Apollo classroom, with students declaring that teachers only rarely got angry at them when they did not do their homework [d] (deviation of 0.98/1.09) and that as students, they were almost never scared of the teacher [h] (deviation of 1.21/1.09). Reported scores for the day schools are both higher, testifying of the sense of fear that still permeates Vietnamese education.

4. Conclusion

While in general students declare enjoying their experience in the traditional and the ESL classroom at the same rate, they clearly value the student-centered classroom for helping them feel safer, more self-confident, and more cared for. All things considered, they seem to believe the main motivation of the ESL teacher is to assist them in their successful learning process, and their answers shine a light on the significant gap currently existing between the ESL classroom and their regular Vietnamese day school: they perceive the ESL teacher as a gentle facilitator, as opposed to a master managing their classroom using threats and fear.

Based on the results observed, and considering the importance in having both teachers and students understand what student-centered classroom management is, we believe that more studies in the field and open conversations with the different actors of the field of education would allow to develop the general awareness of its methodology and benefits.

Bibliography

[1] J. Darling, *Child Centered Education and its Critics*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 116, 1994.

[2] L. Jones, The Student-Centered Classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[3] D. VanHousen, "Effective Classroom Management in Student-Centered Classrooms," Master's degree thesis submitted to the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education, 2013.

[4] N. Dollard, L. Christensen, K. Colucci, "Constructive Classroom Management," *Focus on Exceptional Children*, Oct., 29, 1-12, 1996.

[5] J. Brown, "Student-centered Instruction: Involving Students in their Own Education," *Music Educators Journal*, 94 (5), 30-35, 2008.

[6] A. Kohn, "Progressive Education: why it's Hard to Beat, but Also Hard to Find," *Independent School*, Spring, 1-8, 2008.

[7] B. McCombs, and L. Miller, *Learner-centered classroom practices and assessments,* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2007.

[8] N. Kerdikoshvili, "Student-Centered Approach to Classroom Management in English Language Teaching," *Journal of Education*, 1 (2), 53-60, 2012.

[9] N. T. T. Phan, "Effective EFL Instruction in the Vietnamese Context: From Beliefs to Actual Classroom Practices." *International Journal of Instruction*, 11 (3), 403-418, 2018.

[10] A. Habok and S. Van Nguyen, "Students' Beliefs about Teachers' Roles in Vietnamese Classrooms," *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 18:1. 38-59, 2021.

[11] "English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher Job Description." *Apollo English official website*. Available at : https://apollo.edu.vn/co-hoi-nghe-nghiep/ESL-teacher-job. Last successfully accessed October 24, 2022.

[12] R. E. Stake, *Qualitative Research: Studying how Things Work*, New York: Guilford Press, 2010.

[13] J.W. Creswell, *Educational Research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.), Boston: Pearson, 2012.

[14] C. Charles, *Building Classroom Discipline,* 8th edition. Boston: Pearson, 2005.

[15] E. Bondy and D. Ross, "The Teacher as Warm Demander," *Educational Leadership*, Sep., 66 (1), 54-58, 2008.

[16] A. O. Soter, L. Rudge, "What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April 11-15, 2005.

[17] B. McCombs "Using a 360 degree assessment model to support learning to learn," in R. Deaking Crick, K. Ren, C. Stringher ed., *Learning to Learn: International perspectives from theory and practice*, London: Routledge, 2014.