

Pushing the student-centered envelope: A corporate meeting-style approach

Keywords

student-centered, meeting-style, coaching

This paper advocates a student-centered approach in which students teach an entire class with minimal instructor intervention. The roots of the approach come from corporate training and business skills classes which attempt to maximize learner involvement, and have been welcomed by corporate skills trainers, ESL teachers, and students.

本論では、学生に与える教師の干渉が最小限になる学習者中心のアプローチについて述べる。これは、学習者が最大限参加できる企業研修とビジネス・スキルの授業から始まったものであり、企業研修担当講師・ESL教師・学生に好まれるアプローチである。

この方法は、ビジネスの会議をモデルとして、学習者が交代で議長を務める。教師から、授業の概要と議長としての適切な用語を教えもらい、教師がほとんど関わることなく学習者が授業を進めていく。各セッションの後では、教師が建設的なフィードバックを与える。グループの長がグループワークを指揮し、クラス全体のエネルギーを高めながら、授業のペースと方向を決めていくのである。

この方法は、学習者へコントロールを移す効用を謳っている。カリキュラムは随時練り直していき、教師はかなりの自己モニターと熟慮をしなくては行けない。

Dale Ward

Kansai University

Liz Wade

Corporate trainer

Andrew Dowling

Ritsumeikan University

THIS METHOD uses a business meeting model in which students take turns acting as group chair, and, armed with a lesson outline provided by the instructor and a guide to appropriate *chair* language, conduct the whole lesson with minimal instructor involvement but with the instructor generally giving constructive feedback after the session. It is the group *chairperson* who maintains the pace and direction of the lesson by directing group work, and encouraging and focusing the energy of the class.

The method celebrates the efficacy of transferring control to learners by negotiating curricula, requiring the instructor to engage in considerable self-monitoring and reflection.

Student-centered training

Few instructors would argue these days with the idea that classes be as student-centered as possible. Instructors should aim - especially where classes have a communicative focus - to reduce their classroom role while encouraging learners to become actively rather than passively engaged in learning.

Many instructors will have adopted this approach to varying degrees, have students check homework in quorum, present grammar points to the class, lead discussions, and so forth. They may encourage students to self-monitor their learning through the use of journals, and the learning process can even be the focus of ongoing negotiation between instructor and students, resulting in mutual agreement on course content.

These procedures are all quite commonly presented, but do they represent the limits of how student-centered teachers can be? The application of business training procedures in the language classroom suggests student-centered practices can be pushed further than many educators realize.

Bearing comparison with Palincsar and Brown's reciprocal teaching method (1984), the learner-centered approach described here is based around a meeting style in which students teach an entire class with minimal instructor intervention. Liz Wade has been developing and using this method for more than five years with beginners to advanced trainees, mainly for business courses but also with doctors, academics, tour guides, and others. Students take turns acting as chairperson or group leader, and, armed with a carefully prepared lesson outline provided by the instructor, and a list of *appropriate chairperson language* (Appendix A), lead the entire class with little immediate instructor involvement. However, it is important to note that the instructor provides closing feedback at the end of the training.

This approach encourages students to participate and cooperate more and take responsibility for their own learning. The group chairperson maintains the pace and direction of the lesson by overseeing group interaction, encouraging, and focusing classmates' energies. Though pacing varies according to the character of the group, the classroom atmosphere is generally more charged and attentive. Learners are actively engaged in the learning process rather than passively receiving information via the instructor, and generally enjoy having more independence and control over their learning.

One goal is emphasizing in learners' minds the fact that language acquisition does not only happen under instructor supervision. Students should be able to access the same information as the instructor, and without problems if we are pitching our materials accurately. Learner responsibility is thus maximized, and by offering language as a tool with which to negotiate with their peers, leads students to find their own answers.

Initially there may be cultural barriers and student resistance to overcome. But students usually soon recognize that the intercultural business skills they are practicing through language have uses far beyond their immediate language learning applications, and quickly adapt to self-directed learning.

Acting as neither a safety net nor an authority figure, the instructor is challenged to break out of ingrained patterns, and must engage in considerable self-monitoring and reflection. The instructor must consider whether it is worth interrupting at the expense of fluency, though interruption may be appropriate (a) to clarify a linguistic item (especially if students are likely to use it again during the lesson), or (b) if a group is having difficulty comprehending something. However, the instructor should not unduly affect learners' confidence by jumping in, and may discretely intervene by slipping advice notes to students.

This approach does not advocate simply handing the entire process over to the students. Professional educators must establish the goals and expectations of the class. The instructor in fact needs to have a more developed view of what is talking place in the classroom in this approach and therefore it requires more thought and preparation.

The business context

The practicality of this approach has been clearly demonstrated in business classes. Students quickly become familiar with the basic format: small talk, discussing homework, meeting tasks, feedback, next week's assignment. The only variables are the chairperson and the weekly tasks.

Students enter the "meeting room" for their weekly English session having already received an agenda from their chairperson. If students are not fully prepared (for instance by not having completed their homework), they manage the issue as they would in a work situation: by offering solutions to the team rather than presenting problems to the instructor.

In fact, there is no *instructor*, but rather a *trainer* who acts as guide, consultant, and coach. Nor is this, strictly speaking, a lesson, but rather a training session in which each student aims to achieve goals they have negotiated with their trainer: to contribute more effectively in meetings, negotiate with overseas counterparts, or develop a better command of English in order to win promotion. In this context, students approach training as an important part of their career.

Although the chair directs the discourse, this method emphasizes working in a team, reflecting Gee, Hull, and Lankshear's concern that, "knowledge and understanding must be public, collaborated and distributed" (1996, p. 61). This is especially important, we feel, for less-able students. Quieter, more reticent members feel less pressure than in traditional-style courses. They can answer at their own pace, though everyone in the team is expected to contribute, and all members take turns chairing the meetings.

The trainer sits discreetly on the sidelines with a copy of the agenda and waits for the chair to start the meeting. If the chairperson falters, they refer to the handout of *Appropriate chairperson language* (Appendix A).

"Phrases to Chair" handed out at the start of the course. These might include appropriate ways to begin the meeting ("Is everyone ready to start?"), transition phrases ("Let's move on to the next topic"), and ways of inviting members to contribute ("Did you want to add something, Aya?").

Once the meeting starts, the trainer observes carefully but unobtrusively in case assistance is needed, but mostly takes notes on language, interactive, and cultural skills. Those notes are used for feedback on common group errors, as well as specific ones to help each trainee reach their goals. The trainer may thus address the group during the final ten minutes of the meeting in order to draw their attention to group errors.

If there is a sense in which the feedback becomes teacher-centered instruction, this should be seen as a positive aspect. Just as a business skills workshop would conclude with trainer feedback, the same applies here, as the instructor compiles a written list of pointers to be discussed later during a private feedback meeting with individual students. In business classes, trainees may even ask for more feedback on language or business skills. They recognize that the trainer is focused upon their goals and trainer input is crucial as a means of focusing students upon self-improvement.

Example: Civil service trainees

The meeting skills method was recently adapted for a 1-week ESL course for civil service trainees at Japan's main civil service academy. Students were civil servants in their twenties. The class in question consisted of 8 intermediate to high intermediate students who exhibited interest, motiva-

tion, and ability in English generally above the norm for Japanese people in their peer group.

The course objective was to give students practice using English where it might prove useful in particular work situations. These included describing jobs and daily routines, assisting foreign residents at a reception counter, and telephone English. Japanese course directors were keen to make students more responsible for their own learning by addressing these objectives under the umbrella of a meeting style, thus "releasing... students into student-centered learning exercises" (Ogawa & Wilson, 1997).

Class materials took the form of a text book which had been specially-designed for this communicative course with a great deal of input from native speaker instructors. Since students were to "teach" these classes, the onus was placed upon them to prepare for class as homework.

Students were at first taken aback when the meeting-style class was introduced in oral and written form (Appendix B), but after seeing the instructor's model demonstration of the procedure they took to it with enthusiasm. Students were then presented with a class schedule and invited to volunteer for the classes they wished to teach.

The chairperson was presented with a lesson plan in advance of the class (Appendix C), and prepared the lesson as homework the night before. Since students had also received a demonstration lesson, plus a list of appropriate phrases and classroom strategies, they all performed with high levels of success. It was helpful that the student with the most advanced language skills volunteered to chair the first student-led class, setting a good example for everyone. There were 11 lesson slots available for 8 students, and no shortage of volunteers to teach the extra sessions.

While any new method may reinvigorate student interest, aspects of this method lead directly to success. Students have the opportunity to produce a good deal of language in as low stress and as realistic a situation as possible. Further, language production is directly related to the students' work-related needs. As White (2006) stresses, knowledge is a product of "the activity, context and culture in which it is developed [with learning] situated in the context in which it is taught and ... in the activity in which the learner is engaged" (p.2).

Recommendations

The scenario described above gives a brief idea of the scope of the meeting-style approach, and is typical of that expected from a group of pre-intermediate students. Depending on the students' goals, it can be used with or without a textbook. The basic format is completely adaptable and, with time, confidence, and planning, can be applied to many teaching situations and levels of student ability, even with beginners.

In a university context, larger class sizes and varying levels of motivation present different challenges from a typical conversation school or business English class. The approach can be adapted to large classes by dividing into groups, but the increased amount of monitoring and instructor feedback required makes this method more suited for smaller classes or adult learners. One advantage of this method for university-style classes is that, where research is a core component of the syllabus, it may enhance and deepen study, since the added motivation and interest created by having student instructors increases the reception of ideas and affects the way research is presented.

At the completion of the civil service course, students were invited to complete a feedback questionnaire (Appendix D) which yielded positive responses (Table 1).

The complete results (Appendix D) also supported interesting insights into the success or failure of the approach. Reaction was overwhelmingly positive, given the following caveats: students may want to please their instructor by offering positive feedback, or have difficulty expressing subjective assessment of an improvement in communicative competence in a quantifiable way.

The main reason for learners' enthusiasm was that they genuinely felt they had spoken more of the target language and relished the control they were given and the challenge of leading their class in a second language. The method placed them in a situation where they were almost compelled, as class leaders, to use English. Students also seemed to feel less pressure not having to satisfy a traditional teacher-centered instructor.

There were one or two comments about the method being different from anything learners had encountered in a Japanese classroom. Though

Table 1. Excerpted student feedback on the meeting-style approach

Item	Responses
Did you enjoy this method?	Yes: 8 No: 0
Why/Why not?	<i>"I spoke more English than I thought possible." "I liked being a leader."</i>
Was this method better or worse than other styles of language classes you have experienced?	Better: 7 Don't know: 1 Worse: 0
Why?	<i>"I think I spoke more English." "We can have bigger control. Japanese teachers don't do that."</i>
Did your English improve in this class?	Yes: 8 No: 0
Would you like to try this method again?	Yes: 7 No: 1
Why/Why not?	<i>"It was really hard, but I learned a lot."</i>
Other comments:	<i>"I liked this method and I think I definitely used more English."</i>

we are wary about imposing our own pedagogical or cultural values on our students, this also seemed to have been a useful exercise in terms of exposing learners to alternative educational approaches. It seemed to have alerted students to other styles of language learning, and showed that language learning need not be divorced from a realistic context.

Clearly the method introduces challenges for both instructor and students alike, especially with regard to learner motivation - always a crucial factor in language learning. Some students experience confusion or conflict and have problems adjusting to a new method. However, even students initially skeptical toward such "unaccustomed forms of action" (Unesco, 1996), showed enthusiasm for the methodology by the end of the course, in most cases relishing the control they were given. Learners tended to quickly adapt once they realized that the instructor would be neither a safety net nor an authority figure. With regard to supervising a language learning environment, their subjective assessment was that their chair skills, confidence, and language ability had all improved. This was meaningful for all class members but especially among women members. Not only that, these activities help build skills that can be extended to L1 communication.

Conclusion

The general perception among students that they had meaningfully interacted with peers and had also been alerted to other styles of language learning certainly reflects the way this methodology—which takes place very much in the spirit of *situated learning* (White, 2006)—engages learners "in forms of pragmatic social action" (New Basics Project, 2001, p.5)

Furthermore, if communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), rather than linguistic accuracy is the yardstick by which this methodology should be judged, then these students had demonstrably succeeded. Not only had student involvement, responsibility, and language production been increased, but this had occurred in as realistic and challenging a situation as we could devise. Moreover pressure had been minimized through the absence of a traditional teacher at the center, and this shift in the instructor's role required them to reassess their assumptions about pedagogy and have a more developed view of the classroom scenario. As a result, the student-centered envelope had been pushed further than might have been anticipated.

Dale Ward has more than 25 years ESL experience in the UK, Italy, the United States, and Japan. He is a language instructor at Kansai University, Osaka. **Liz Wade** has had 15 years Human Resources and Training experience and for 9 years has been involved with ELT in Japan, Egypt, and England. She is currently a corporate trainer in the Kansai area. **Andrew Dowling** has taught English to corporate and university students in Japan for 5 years. He is an instructor at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. Please contact us if you wish to learn more about this technique. We would be interested to hear from others who have practiced something similar. Please email <daleward@gmail.com>.

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Appendices

Appendix A: *Appropriate chairperson language*, Appendix B: *Introduction of meeting-style class*, Appendix C: *Example lesson plan handout for student chairperson*, and Appendix D: *Student feedback questionnaire and complete responses* can be viewed online at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2008/0809b.pdf>

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Dale Ward, Kansai University; Liz Wade, Corporate trainer; Andrew Dowling, Ritsumeikan University

Appendix A

Appropriate chairperson language

Meeting skills

Try to use these phrases and strategies each week we meet. Bring them with you to every session or memorize them. Keep them where you can see them at all times.

Before the meeting

Most meetings (unless they are both spontaneous and urgent) start with 1-3 minutes of small talk to make everyone feel comfortable. Try to start small talk naturally by asking a question or making a statement e.g.

- "How are you today?"
- "Did you have a nice weekend?"
- "Lovely / terrible weather today, isn't it?"

(Note: Don't start by saying, "let's have some small talk.")

Opening the meeting

- "All right, well if everyone's here, let's start."
- "Ok, well shall we start?"

Moving between topics

- "Right, let's move on to the next item"

Asking someone to lead a particular topic

- "Carol, would you lead this topic?"

Ending the meeting

- "This is a good point to end the meeting. The next meeting will be on 29th July in this room at 10 o'clock. The chairperson will be Karen."
- "Right, well I think we've covered everything so let's finish here. The next meeting will be on 29th July in this room at 10 o'clock. The chairperson will be Karen."

Asking for contributions

Always make sure everyone contributes.

- "Ken, would you like to comment?"
- "What do you think, Yuko?"

Appendix B

Introduction of meeting-style class (Handout to students)

The Student-centered classroom: What? Why? How?

What is a student-centered class?

A class in which students take over responsibility for class activities, and do not depend on the teacher. This method is receiving a lot of attention among teachers and linguists.

Why have student-centered classes?

Motivation and participation are key factors in language learning. This method ensures that students participate more, cooperate more and take responsibility for their own learning.

How does a student centered-class work?

Students act as group "leaders". The leader is given instructions by the teacher, which he/she uses in class.

Is the method successful?

Yes. Students enjoy having more independence and control over their learning

Are there any drawbacks?

In the beginning, some students resist the method. But after one or two classes, students usually enjoy it.

So what does the teacher do?

The teacher must monitor the class carefully, and also think carefully about preparation for lessons. At the end of each class, the teacher offers feedback.

Appendix C

Example lesson plan handout for student chairperson

Information for Class Leader

Class: 1

- Date: Wed 9/6
- Topic: Introductions
- Goal(s): To practice introductions

Time	Activity	Description	Materials
1.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Talk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to briefly introduce themselves. 	
1.05	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview a partner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student interview each other in pairs. They have 10 -15 minutes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Interview a partner" worksheet.
1.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask class members to introduce their partner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members introduce their partners. • Invite questions from other members. 	
1.50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give students information about the course / Invite questions. • Ask members, "What does 'student-centered' mean?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell students about class schedule/materials/idea of having a 'team leader' for each class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class schedule/Meeting Skills.
2.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss student expectations/requests for the course. • Decide on tomorrow's leaders. 		

Homework:

1. Complete weekly schedule for tomorrow's first class.
2. Write a short paragraph "Describing your job".

Appendix D

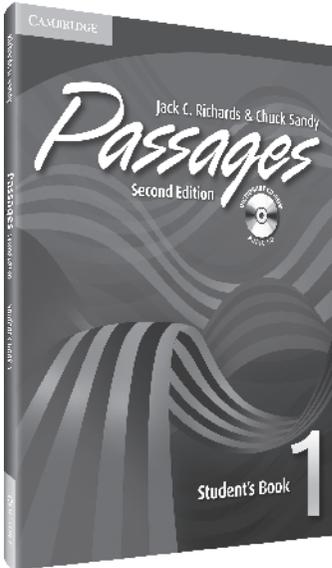
Student feedback questionnaire and complete responses

Did you enjoy this method?	Yes: 8 No: 0
Why/Why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I liked to be in control." • "I spoke more English than I thought possible." • "I liked being a leader." • "I spoke a lot."
Was this method better or worse than other styles of language classes you have experienced?	Better: 7 Don't know: 1 Worse: 0
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I think I spoke more English." • "We can have bigger control. Japanese teachers don't do that." • "I communicated more." • "I did not have to worry about my teacher."
Did your English improve in this class?	Yes: 8 No: 0
Would you like to try this method again?	Yes: 7 No: 1
Why/Why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want to try again." • "It was really hard, but I learned a lot." • "I liked to teach the class." • I didn't like to be class leader. It was too hard for me."
Other Comments:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Thank you. I really enjoyed this style." • "I haven't met this style in Japanese class, therefore it was interesting and challenge for me." • "I was nervous in the beginning, but I feel more confident now." • "I was nervous about being controller." • "This was enjoyable class." • "I have never done like this before. It was interesting and enjoyable, and it challenged us." • "I liked this method and I think I definitely used more English."



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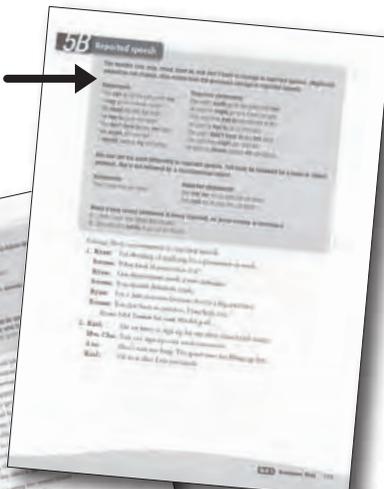


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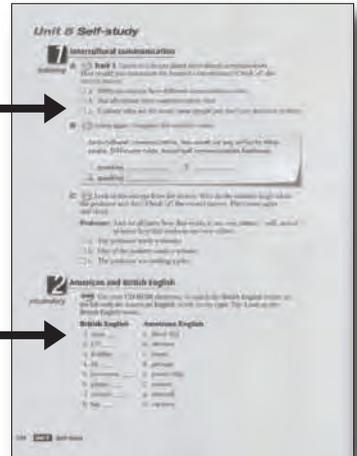
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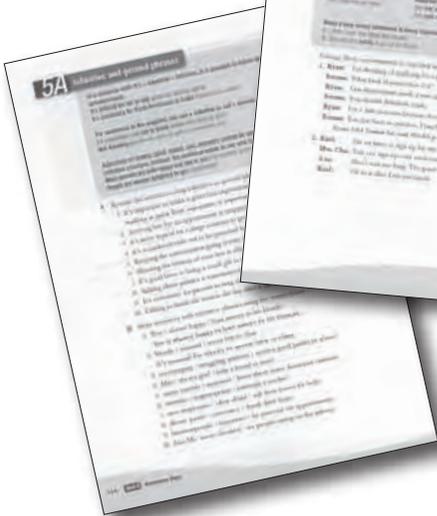
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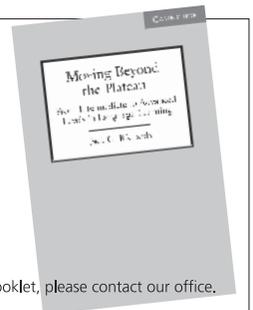
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Tel: 03-3295-5875 Fax: 03-3219-7182 Email: tokyo@cambridge.org

