

# Obstacles in Implementing Learner-Centered Pedagogies in Saudi EFL Context: Implications for Teacher Development

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## Abstract

The paper will explore the challenges faced by EFL teachers while implementing learner-centered instruction in Saudi Arabian university classrooms. Although educational reforms advocate the use of interactive and communicative teaching methodology, instructors still work in a rigid, exam-oriented system that is influenced by cultural norms and institutional limitations. A qualitative phenomenological method was applied to collect data in the form of semi-structured interviews with ten instructors from both male and female campuses of a public university. Thematic analysis identified five barriers, including institutional limitations, absence of professional training, cultural barriers, student readiness, and assessment mismatch. These results indicate the policy-practice gap and call for systematic changes, specific teacher training, and context-specific pedagogical assistance. The research contributes to the current work on the alignment of English language teaching practice with learner-centered principles in the Saudi EFL environment.

**Keywords:** Learner-centered pedagogy, Institutional constraints, Cultural resistance, Teacher training, Qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

The transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy is a paradigm shift in international education, which is concerned with the independence of students, their engagement, and thinking (Weimer, 2013). This methodology is especially compatible with modern theories of second language acquisition, which emphasize the significance of meaningful interaction and engagement of the learner in the process of building communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The learner-centered pedagogy helps students to take control of their learning process and develop such skills as collaboration, problem-solving, and reflection, which are crucial to language acquisition and continuing education in life. Consequently, this change has been adopted in numerous education systems globally as a component of the greater reforms to enhance learning and ensure that what is taught is relevant in the 21st century.

The Ministry of Education has implemented a wide range of reforms in Saudi Arabia with a focus on communicative and interactive learning in the teaching of the English language (Elyas & Picard, 2010). The document of policies and national strategy, such as Saudi Vision 2030, encourages innovation in education and the production of globally competitive graduates (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Nevertheless, in spite of these top-down efforts, classroom practices are still based on the conventional, lecture-based models that focus on memorization and teacher authority (Barnawi & Al-Hazmi, 2017). A number of studies suggest that this gap between policy and practice can be explained by various institutional, cultural, and pedagogical factors restricting the use of learner-centered practices in EFL settings (Alrabai, 2016; Troudi & Alwan, 2010).

In this context, it is important to determine the barriers to the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy to enhance English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. The fact that these barriers have been identified not only illuminates the reason why reforms have failed to take up well but also offers key insights on what needs to change to better support teachers and learners. This paper will examine the experiences and perceptions of instructors teaching in public universities in an attempt to identify structural, cultural, and instructional issues that affect teaching. This way, it adds to the already existing literature on educational reform in the Arab world and provides recommendations on practical steps that can be taken to narrow the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

### *1.1 Rationale for the Study*

The learner-centered instruction encourages motivation, independence, and participation (Weimer, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), yet Saudi Arabian EFL teachers have cultural, institutional, and pedagogical obstacles to implementing it. Firstly, the cultural norms that put the authority of the teacher first will be incompatible with the student-centered learning principles (Elyas & Picard, 2010), while the strict curriculum and exam-based system does not allow flexibility in instruction (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Barnawi & Al-Hazmi, 2017). In addition, numerous teachers indicate that they have not received adequate training and support on learner-centered approaches (Alrabai, 2016). Such difficulties lead to a gap between progressive education policy and practice in the classroom. The study of the lived experience

of teachers provides essential knowledge on how to develop more effective and context-sensitive professional development that would facilitate meaningful pedagogical change.

### *1.2. Research Objective*

- To determine the key challenges experienced by EFL teachers in implementing learner-centred pedagogies.
- To investigate the influence of institutional and sociocultural forces on instructional practices.
- To recommend ways of improving teacher development programs, considering the identified barriers.

### *1.3. Research Questions*

- Which are the key challenges that EFL teachers experience when adopting learner-centered teaching in Saudi classrooms?
- What is the role of institutional and cultural factors in the teaching practice of instructors?
- What are the implications of these barriers for teacher development and policy change?

## **2. Literature Review**

Learner-centered pedagogy has become one of the foundations of modern educational theory and practice. Based on the principles of constructivist learning, it changes the paradigm of the teacher as the only source of knowledge to students as active participants in their learning process. Weimer (2013) argues that learner-centered teaching focuses on autonomy, active engagement, critical thinking, and co-construction of knowledge. This method is compatible with communicative language teaching (CLT) in a second and foreign language learning context since they both promote meaningful interaction, real-life tasks, and engagement with the learners. As Richards and Rodgers (2014) point out, learner-centered pedagogy in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms is linked to better language acquisition, higher motivation among students, and more realistic classroom communication.

However, despite its theoretical attractiveness and empirical evidence, the actual use of learner-centered pedagogy in EFL settings, particularly in the educational systems of the Middle East, has faced strong resistance and institutional challenges. Elyas and Picard (2010) state that in Saudi Arabia, pedagogical change initiatives usually come into direct conflict with established educational customs that place more emphasis on rote learning and teacher-centered education. These institutional practices are deeply rooted within institutional structures that consider knowledge transmission as a one-way process, and they are also reinforced by societal expectations on the role of the teacher as an authoritative figure. In this regard, according to Soomro (2018), role-play and group work as well as pair discussions, picture description, conversation, debate, and storytelling strategies were seldom used by Saudi English language professionals when teaching speaking skills. This implies that there is a rather restricted

application of learner-centered teaching in EFL classrooms.

### *2.1 Institutional Constraints*

Institutional rigidity is one of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to the adoption of learner-centered pedagogy. Middle Eastern educational institutions are characterized by centralized decision-making, a fixed curriculum, and assessment systems that do not allow much innovation in pedagogy. According to Barnawi (2016), even in cases where teachers understand and are ready to embrace innovative teaching methods, they are usually limited by top-down directives that focus on syllabus coverage, standardized assessment, and lesson planning. These restrictions limit the teacher's autonomy and make them reluctant to experiment in the classroom.

In the same vein, Al-Issa and Dahan (2011) note that the culture of many Gulf universities is inclined to give more priority to the delivery of content rather than focusing on student engagement. The most common criteria used to assess teachers is the rate of students passing the examination and covering the curriculum, not their capability to create interactive and reflective learning environments. As a result, instructors tend to fall back onto lecture-based methods, despite being aware of the possible benefits of learner-centered methods. Furthermore, administrators do not usually support pedagogical change. Schools seldom offer structural rewards, like lightened teaching loads, flexibility in curriculum, or acknowledgement, to those teachers who devote time and energy to learning student-centered practices.

The other related problem is the lack of linkage between policy and practice. Although national education reform programs in such countries as Saudi Arabia (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030) demand critical thinking, creativity, and student engagement, classroom practices are mostly traditional. This discrepancy between rhetoric and the realities of reform indicates that systematic change is required both on the macro (policy-making) and micro (classroom) levels.

### *2.2 Student Preparedness and Cultural Expectations*

However, in addition to institutional obstacles, there are also student-related issues that have a serious effect on the feasibility of learner-centered pedagogy. Students in most EFL classrooms in the Middle East come into higher education with a background of passive learning styles. Learners who have spent years being exposed to teacher-centered practices (where memorization is encouraged, and questioning is discouraged) are not used to being autonomous and critical (Alrabai, 2016). This conditioning impacts their capability of being active learners in the classroom, accountable for their learning, and reflective learning.

This issue is further complicated by cultural expectations. In cultures where authority is highly valued, learner-centered activities (e.g., having discussions with peers, debating, or presenting by students) might be perceived by the students as improper or even disrespectful. According to the theory of cultural dimensions by Hofstede (2001), high power-distance cultures tend to be opposed to educational practices that break hierarchical distinctions between teachers and students. This argument is reinforced by Elyas and Aljabri (2016), who conducted a study about Saudi classrooms and found that students and parents tend to associate effective teaching with lecturing and discipline, instead of dialogue and participation. As a result, learners might

oppose or fail to value the advantages of learner-centered approaches, which further supports the resistance of teachers to employ them.

Linguistic competence is another aspect of student preparedness. The instructors often complain that the low English proficiency of students does not allow them to engage in learner-centered activities. According to Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013), communicative skills required in group work, problem-solving, and critical discussions are usually lacking among EFL students in Saudi Arabia. Such students can become anxious, confused, or disengaged without proper language support, which further compromises the effectiveness of student-centered approaches.

### *2.3 Assessment Misalignment*

The third significant obstacle to the use of learner-centered pedagogy is the mismatch between assessment practices and pedagogical objectives. Assessment in most educational systems in the Middle East is still significantly based on standardised testing and factual recall. These approaches encourage rote learning and compliance, but not creativity, critical thinking, or independence in learning. According to Butler (2009), the traditional systems of assessment are fundamentally incompatible with the concepts of communicative and learner-centered instruction that emphasize performance, interaction, and formative assessment.

Teachers are in a bind between the desire to engage students in more interesting classroom activities and the necessity to prepare them for final examinations that evaluate rote knowledge. According to Afitska and Heaton (2019), this contradiction compels teachers to focus on test-taking rather than experience-based learning even in situations when the latter is more effective in language acquisition. Furthermore, students themselves acquire the notion that only the material that is relevant to the exam should be studied. This conviction generates opposition to classroom practices that do not have a direct connection with assessment results, even when these activities strengthen communicative competence.

Teachers also develop their perceptions of instructional success based on assessment constraints. When institutions measure performance through exam scores and not learning, teachers will not be inclined to engage in time-consuming, learner-centered approaches, whose returns may not be evident in the short term. Consequently, the wider purposes of language learning, including fluency, intercultural competence, and autonomous learning, are de-emphasized and replaced with narrow academic standards.

### *2.4 Professional Development Gaps*

Pedagogical knowledge, beliefs, and professional identity of teachers are also important in the successful application of learner-centered pedagogy. Nevertheless, numerous EFL teachers complain that they have not received adequate training on the design, implementation, and evaluation of learner-centered activities. According to Barnawi (2016), in the Gulf region, professional development programs are usually based on the delivery of content and linguistic theory, but not on classroom-oriented strategies. Thus, even enthusiastic educators might not have the instruments and the self-confidence to switch to more modern practices.

Teacher training should not only be about how to use learner-centered pedagogy, but also about why. The educators should be aware of the theoretical basis of these methods and their compliance with the overall educational objectives. Furthermore, continuous mentoring, peer learning, and reflective practice must be incorporated in the professional development models to achieve long-term pedagogical change (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

To conclude, although learner-centered pedagogy has great potential in terms of language acquisition and student engagement, its application to the Middle Eastern EFL setting is still a problematic issue. There is an intricate web of barriers composed of institutional rigidity, test-based assessment systems, culturally preconditioned student passivity, and the absence of professional training. The problems require a multi-faceted solution that entails curriculum reform, culturally sensitive pedagogy, redesigning assessment, and investing in teacher development. The potential of learner-centered pedagogy can be maximized in EFL classrooms throughout the region only with the help of coordinated and context-aware strategies.

### **3. Data Collection and Analysis Process**

The qualitative phenomenological design was used to investigate the lived experience of instructors with learner-centered pedagogy in the Saudi EFL setting. A sample of 10 English language teachers, five men and five women, was chosen in the male and female campuses of a public sector university in Saudi Arabia to make a representative sample based on gender and teaching environment. The purposive sampling was used to recruit participants to represent diversity in terms of teaching experience and professional backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, audio-taped, and transcribed word-for-word. The analysis of the data was performed with the help of the thematic analysis according to the steps provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) that include familiarization with the data by reading it repeatedly; creating initial codes; seeking themes by clustering codes; revising themes; defining and naming themes; and writing a report with rich and contextualized quotes of the participants. The data has revealed five key themes, and the findings are presented according to the themes to reflect the main challenges and approaches expressed by the instructors.

### **4. Findings and Discussions**

The adoption of learner-centered pedagogy in EFL classrooms is not an easy and straightforward process, especially in those settings where the traditional, exam-oriented education system prevails. Based on qualitative information gathered during interviews with ten EFL instructors (five men and five women) of a public sector university in Saudi Arabia, this paper examined the complex obstacles that educators encounter when trying to transition to more interactive and student-centered teaching strategies. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five major themes, which included Institutional Constraints, Lack of Professional Training, Cultural Resistance, Student Preparedness, and Assessment Misalignment. These themes which are structural, cultural, and pedagogical in nature, are deeply rooted and make it difficult to move towards learner-centered approaches. The themes



are presented and discussed in the following sections in detail using the voices of participants and the relevant literature to give a complex picture of the contextual realities that influence teaching practices in Saudi EFL classrooms.

#### *4.1 Institutional Constraints*

Both male and female instructors agreed that one of the biggest hurdles to adopting learner-centered pedagogies were institutional limitations.. The participants pointed out inflexible curricula, top-down decision-making, and the need to cover syllabi within short time durations as the key obstacles. One of the male instructors noted, “We are supposed to complete the syllabus at all costs. There’s no room to allow students to explore or engage in discussions.” (P4). Along similar lines, a female colleague also stated, “Even when I want to try something different, I am always being reminded to cover the content first” (P7). This result can be compared to Al-Seghayer (2014), who claims that educational institutions in Saudi Arabia tend to focus on content coverage and exam preparation rather than innovative teaching methods, which leaves instructors with little freedom to adjust to the needs of students. Likewise, Barnawi and Al-Hazmi (2017) argue that centralized control and inflexible curricular designs restrict the capacity of instructors to apply learner-centered strategies, which need time to interact, reflect, and adjust. These critiques are supported by the experiences of the participants of this study, which indicates that without institutional flexibility and supportive policies, pedagogical reform will be superficial and hard to maintain.

#### *4.2 Lack of Professional Training*

The absence of professional training was another common theme among the participants who were frustrated by the lack of preparation to engage in learner-centered pedagogies. Both male and female teachers emphasized the lack of institutional support to provide them with the required skills. One male respondent mentioned, “We never received any workshops or training on how to move towards student-centered teaching” (P1), while a female instructor said, “Most of what I learned was through trial and error; we are supposed to teach differently, but no one shows us how to do it” (P6). Interestingly, only two of the ten participants stated that they had received any formal training; one of them said that she completed online Cambridge courses, and the other participant said that she attended onsite workshops organized by a private educational provider. Most of them, however, felt that they did not have the professional development that could help them to utilize learner-centered pedagogy in their classrooms. Such experiences echo the results of Elyas and Picard (2010), who claim that Saudi EFL teachers are frequently left unsupported in terms of pedagogical guidelines, especially concerning communicative and learner-centered methodologies. Alrabai (2011) also discovered that teacher training programs in Saudi Arabia are more inclined to theoretical knowledge and pay little attention to the practical implementation of knowledge, which makes the teachers unprepared for the requirements of interactive teaching. Further, Troudi and Alwan (2010) suggest that professional development in the region is usually episodic and unrelated to the realities of teaching, which further supports the use of traditional methods. The overlap of the testimonies of the participants and the academic evidence suggests that it is high time to develop systematic practice-based training programs that could contribute to the pedagogical

transformation toward learner-centered instruction in a meaningful way.

#### *4.3 Cultural Resistance*

Both male and female instructors cited cultural resistance as a major barrier and stressed that entrenched attitudes toward teaching are a major impediment to the implementation of learner-centered methods. Five participants (three male and two female) explicitly associated student and parent expectations with the traditional, lecture-based approaches. One female teacher said, “When I attempt group work or peer learning, some students think that I am not teaching correctly” (P6), and one male teacher added, “When I back off, students think that I am not doing my job” (P3). A second female respondent added, “Parents also criticize the approach, particularly when they learn that students did not get direct teaching” (P9). Likewise, male participants (P2 and P8) noted that “students tend to avoid collaboration activities and want to be told what to do by the teacher,” which shows the cultural norm of teacher dominance. Such observations can be supported by the findings of Elyas and Picard (2010), which state that the cultural construct of the teacher as the authority figure in Saudi classrooms makes teachers resist the pedagogical models that promote student autonomy. Al-Seghayer (2014) also confirms this by observing that learners and their families tend to appreciate strict, exam-oriented teaching more than process-based learning, which is perceived as ineffective. Also, Barnawi and Al-Hazmi (2017) note that this resistance is not just passive but is rooted in the overall societal norms, and it is challenging to introduce new methods without being met with skepticism or opposition by instructors. According to the findings of the present study, similarly, Farooq, Soomro, and Umer (2018) point out in their study that foreign language teachers should be conversant with the target language culture and the culture of learners and the practice of pedagogy is by nature culturally-determined. They suggest that native English-speaking teachers as well as Saudi English teachers should obtain training to curtail the cultural resistance in the process of introducing learner-centered pedagogies. The experiences of the participants in this study affirm that cultural attitudes should be addressed by using a wider awareness, parent involvement, and a slow pedagogical transition to enable sustainable change.

#### *4.4 Student Preparedness*

One of the major issues that was raised repeatedly by instructors was the insufficient preparation of the students, especially in the areas of motivation and linguistic proficiency. These constraints were a major obstacle to classroom interaction and a learner-centered approach. One male instructor observed, “They come to class passive, waiting to be spoon-fed.” It’s very difficult to engage them in critical thinking.” (P7). The same perception was shared by a female teacher who claimed, “Most of them are not used to expressing their opinions. They wait to hear the teacher speak, as they can just take notes.” (P3). Another male participant pointed to the language barrier: “They are confused by even simple instructions in English. So we spend too much time explaining tasks.” (P9).

These findings are in line with the previous literature on the difficulties presented by the low proficiency of the students and their passive learning styles in most EFL settings. Alrabai (2016) claims that the low intrinsic motivation and exam-oriented learning culture in Saudi Arabia are the reasons why learners are passive and do not want to participate. Equally, Borg (2006)



highlights that the linguistic constraints of students limit teachers to using communicative and critical pedagogies and force them to resort to more controlled and teacher-centered teaching.

Additionally, teachers cited a wider gap in academic readiness and motivation in students. One of the female instructors said, “They hardly do the readings or come prepared. So, each conversation starts from zero.” (P5). Another said, “The majority of them appear to be afraid of making mistakes in front of others, and this makes them quiet even when they have the answer.” (P4). These findings indicate that even the behaviors of students are influenced by psychological factors like fear of negative evaluation, which is consistent with the research conducted by Horwitz et al. (1986), who headed the study on Foreign Language Anxiety. One male teacher summed up, “I sometimes feel like I am more motivating them than teaching them. It is emotionally exhausting.” (P2).

Collectively, the data indicate that there is a mismatch between the goals of instruction and student readiness and that there is an urgent need to provide remedial language support and confidence-building strategies. These results justify the argument that reforms for interactive and learner-centered pedagogy can be viewed as primarily aspirational without tackling the problem of student preparedness (Littlewood, 2007).

#### *4.5 Mismatch between Teaching and Assessment Practices*

One of the major challenges faced by instructors was the discrepancy between assessment practices and the objectives of learner-centered pedagogy. Some participants complained that institutional assessment is still based on rote learning and examination-based assessment, which discourages creativity in teaching and active involvement on the part of the students. One of the male teachers stated, “All this is because of targeting the final exam, and students are interested to learn exam-related content.” Similarly, a female instructor shared, “They will not even listen to it unless it is included in the exam. It restricts our role and authority in class.” (P6). These observations indicate that the exam-based culture is counterproductive to the instructional process that focuses on critical thinking, communication, and learner autonomy.

This issue is aligned with the research pointing to the incompatibility of the traditional assessment systems in most EFL settings, especially in the Middle East, with the learner-centered approach. As Afitska and Heaton (2019) note, summative assessment that focuses on factual knowledge and does not promote higher-order thinking will discourage teachers from experimenting with student-led activities. Rather, instructors and learners end up obsessed with predictable test results. One of the female participants stated, “I attempted project-based activities, and students were confused.” Surprisingly, one of the students asked, “Is this going to be on the exam?” (P3). Another male teacher also said, “Although I would like to attempt something different, the grading system drags me back to lectures and handouts.” (P8).

Moreover, assessment formats are usually rigid and allow little opportunity to assess communicative competence in authentic situations. One female instructor remarked, “We do little to evaluate speaking or writing in a meaningful way. It is all just grammar and vocabulary quizzes.” (P1). One male colleague voiced the same issue and said, “Our tests are not in line with the actual use of the language, which is the reason why students don’t feel interested in

discussions or activities with peers.” (P7). These results echo Butler (2009), who criticizes the usage of standardized language tests in Asian settings, as these tests marginalize the most important communicative and critical skills. Instructional innovation will not occur unless assessments are redesigned to reward learner agency and interactive performance (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2019).

Such results correspond to the literature on pedagogical restrictions in EFL settings. Rigidity and lack of support in the institutions are indicative of systemic problems. In addition, the conflict between contemporary pedagogy and traditional cultural norms makes pedagogical change more difficult. The findings support the necessity of contextualized teacher training, which would not only focus on skills but also attitudes and expectations. It is also important to align assessments with learner-centered outcomes to contribute to pedagogical innovation.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has illuminated the ongoing difficulties that EFL teachers have experienced in the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in the Saudi Arabian higher education setting. Based on the views of both male and female instructors at a public sector university, the results indicate that there are five interconnected and deeply embedded obstacles, namely institutional limits, professional training deficiency, cultural opposition, student lack of preparation, and misalignment of assessment. All of these difficulties create a closed ecosystem that constrains pedagogical innovation and does not encourage risk-taking by instructors. Although there are institutional demands to modernize and encourage critical thinking in education, the actual classroom realities remain traditional, teacher-centered.

Educational stakeholders need to resolve these systemic problems by implementing extensive reforms in order to move forward. This involves providing increased curricular freedom, assessment corresponding to communicative and interactive results, and providing long-term, context-based professional growth. It is also essential to encourage a progressive cultural change among students, parents, and educators to adopt the idea of autonomy, participation, and learner agency as a part of effective language learning. In the absence of such comprehensive and integrated initiatives, the promise of learner-centered pedagogy in Saudi EFL classrooms might never be fulfilled, and pedagogical change will still be met with great resistance.

### 5.1 Recommendations

This study has a number of important recommendations to facilitate the effective adoption of learner-centered pedagogy in Saudi EFL classrooms. First, there is a need to reform the institutions; universities need to provide instructors with more autonomy and flexibility in curriculum delivery that can allow them to modify content and approaches to the needs of students. Second, Soomro and Almalki (2017) in their study reported: though teachers position themselves to be ready to leave traditional modes of pedagogies behind, they struggle to engage and embrace other manners of working since they are faced with a variety of institutional, cultural and training problems. It is thus proposed in this respect that much effective training

programs need to be customized to assist teachers to embrace the learner-centered pedagogies. In this regard, professional development should be focused, and the training programs should provide practical hands-on workshops, peer mentoring, and constant support that emphasizes practical learner-centered strategies. Third, cultural orientation programs are to be implemented in order to overcome existing attitudes towards teaching and learning and ensure buy-in among stakeholders, including students, parents, and administrators. Fourth, there should be a reform in the assessment to ensure that the systems of evaluation are in line with communicative competence and critical thinking skills as opposed to a culture of rote learning. Lastly, support networks (e.g., communities of practice) should be developed to enable instructors to share experiences, resources, and solutions to shared problems, to foster sustainable pedagogical change

### *5.2 Limitations and Further Research*

The small sample size and the limitation of instructors to only the university level limited this study and therefore, the results could not be generalized to the greater population. These limitations may be resolved in future studies by investigating the views of students and comparing and contrasting them with teachers to get a more comprehensive idea of classroom dynamics. Furthermore, longitudinal research may be done to test the long-term effects of professional development programs on teaching and student outcomes. Additional research could also be applied to primary and secondary school settings to establish whether there are similar issues and obstacles to learner-centered pedagogy at lower levels of education.

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