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Research Article

Learner-Centered English Teaching in a Blended Learning Setting during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis brought worldwide changes in education resulting to employment of blended learning in schools. In this context, teachers hold classes in both online and traditional learning mode. This new landscape demands knowledge in terms of effectiveness of the widely advocated learner-centered method. Hence, with the participation of university students, the researchers conducted this quasi-experimental study. In addition, the study used inferential statistical treatments to determine the difference of participants' performance. Results show that there is significant difference in the performance of the participants before and after exposure to learner-centered method in blended learning modality. Therefore, the researchers recommend the adoption of learner-centered method even in the new landscape of the academe now embracing the blended learning.

Keywords: *Blended learning, Learner-centered, Quasi-experimental*

Introduction

The primary goal of any level of education is to effect fundamental change in the learner (Tebabal and Kahssay, 2011; Olkishoo et al., 2019; Marta et al., 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the drastic shifts in new learning modalities has been evident, from traditional to online and quite recently, a mixed of both methods which is referred to as blended learning. This fact urges evaluation on the effectiveness of teaching methods incorporated in English classes that surfaced. This is because there were only a limited number of studies that

tackled their effectiveness, such as the learner-centered teaching methods, especially on how the learner-centered teaching methods boost academic performance in a blended type of learning setting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Undeniably, the education system is one of the agencies profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Li and Lalani (2020), around 1.2 billion students in 186 countries are out of school during the pandemic. Many nations attempted to open classes after a month of lockdown, but many had failed.

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Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the educational landscape dramatically and brought evident changes especially on how teachers hold English classes in a normal traditional classroom setting.

Due to social distancing protocols, there were changes from the face-to-face interaction in traditional learning set-up to online modality. To protect students from COVID-19, teachers from all over the world accepted the task of teaching in the new normal. Later on, as the COVID-19 cases continued to drop and the normal pace of education starts to re-surface. Thus, the new educational set-up called blended learning existed in most educational institutions. Blended learning, also known as hybrid learning, is an educational approach utilizing both online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods (Yeap et al., 2022; Siddiqui et al., 2020; Quigley, 2019;). This means that both teachers and learners are in a compromising stage in the new academic landscape with a common goal of continuous teaching and learning.

However, while both ends adjust in the new academic setting, learning advocates remain steadfast in the concept that learner-centered teaching such as in English classes remain more favorable than shifting to teacher-centered teaching. The concept of learner-centered teaching as originally advocated by Bloom et al. (1956) and supported by recent scholars like Suh and Ahn (2022), banked on the idea of fostering student engagement through active learning activities and assessments which can impact comprehension, retention, and problem-solving skills.

In the Philippines, under the K12 Basic Education curriculum instituted through Republic Act 10533 focused on developing critical thinking and scientific skills designed with emphasis on subject-centered, learner-centered and problem-based setting (Tupas and Laguda, 2020). These are critical to equip learners and better prepared for the world outside the school.

Thus, education in the Philippines envisions students to excel in classes by giving good academic performance with valued skills and attitudes. Unexpectedly, it is said that the

majority of students consistently perform poorly in school and they have seen that students' achievement is fundamentally linked to teachers' poor professional development (Chin et al., 2022) consequently using ineffective teaching methods to impart knowledge to students (Isa et al, 2020) that led to teacher-centered setting like in English classrooms.

Hence, with the shifting academic landscape to blended learning, there is a need to study the effectiveness of learner-centered teaching strategy in fostering academic performance of students in English classrooms. Along this, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of learner-centered method in teaching English language in a blended type of learning set-up.

This study specifically focused on:

- 1) determining the participants' level of pre-test performance in English Language System course before exposure to learner centered method;
- 2) determining the participants' level of post-test performance in English Language System course after exposure to learner centered method; and
- 3) testing for possible significant difference in the participants' level of pre and post-test performance in English Language System course.

Methods

Design

This investigation utilized a quasi-experimental design. It is very similar to experimental research only that this research design does not use a control group, no random selection, no random assignment, and/or no active manipulation. Hence, in the study, the design identifies the same group exposed first to a non-learner centered method then proceed to exposure to learner-centered method type of teaching. The comparison of results followed. Then it employed inferential statistics to compare the differences between treatments to generalize about the larger population of subjects.

Environment

The researchers conducted the study at Cebu Technological University -Argao Campus. This is an institution of higher learning in a

rural community. The campus is at Ed Kintanar, Lamacon, Argao, Cebu. It is 69 kilometers from Cebu City in Cebu Province's southeastern corridor. As part of the new academic landscape, the campus also adopted the blended learning modality. To cater more learners and at the same time to adjust slowly in allowing learners to physically report to the campus, the campus shifted to blended learning. In addition, the campus is equipped with technological equipment and internet connectivity making it convenient for teachers to shift from in-person to online instruction during the blended learning modality.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, the study participants were the nineteen (19) students in the program Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies particularly those enrolled in language courses in the curriculum, such as the Introduction to the English Language System subject. The researchers considered the participation of these students primarily because of the fact that the nature of their program fits in the context of blended learning modality. Meaning, the teachers can deliver the lessons suitably through blended learning unlike those programs that really require physical or in-person attendance during instruction.

Instrument

Moreover, this research study utilized an adapted questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of learner-centered teaching method. The Standardized test consists of 70 items that have specific learning outcomes to identify improvement in the students' pretest and post test scores. The learning outcomes include: (1) recall the topics pertaining to the course; (2) differentiate difference between linguistic concepts; (3) pronounce the segmental phonemes; vowels and consonants.

Data Gathering

The research followed a scientific process to produce fair-minded, cogent, and useful evidence for trustworthy conclusions and recommendations. Hence, the researchers observed the phases of pre-gathering, during, and post-gathering.

In the pre-gathering, it involves the preparation of all required documents including the transmittal letter for approval to conduct the study. Once, approved, there was an orientation for the participants. This was necessary to discuss their rights and all other ethical concerns involving the study. Then there was also presentation and discussion of schedule of the experiments.

Moreover, in the actual gathering phase, the teacher handling the subject taught the participants in a non-learner-centered method guided by the targeted learning outcomes then the participants received the pre-test. Then the utilization of learner-centered method followed. Subsequently, the teacher provided the post-test.

In the post-gathering phase, the researchers considered the debriefing for the participants. Then the sorting and analysis of data commenced. The use of statistical tools helped the researchers in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

The study utilized primarily descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. The study also employed inferential statistical treatment like t-test. Mean in statistics, is the sum of all values divided by the total number of values, which is also referred to as "average" while standard deviation (SD) measures the extent of scattering in a set of values, typically compared to the mean value of the set (Whitley & Ball, 2002). The study used the computation of mean and standard deviation both in the pre-test and in post-test scores of the respondents. Moreover, in knowing the significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the students, the study utilized a statistical treatment tool known as t-test. This is an appropriate statistical treatment for hypothesis testing to determine whether a process or treatment has an effect on the population of interest, or whether the two groups differ as pointed out by Bevens (2020). Lastly, to ensure reliability in the computation, the study used the licensed statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS).

Ethical Considerations

The research participants are informed and are completely aware about the purpose, benefits and risks behind the study before they agree to join. The participants fully understood the research and therefore they provided full consent as participant of the study. The entire informed consent procedure entails providing a subject with sufficient information about the study, giving them enough time to consider all of their options, answering their questions, confirming that they have understood this information, and getting their voluntary consent.

In addition, this study made sure of the confidentiality of information concerning the research participants' data and other information. Hence, the study provided the assurance to the study participants that at all time; there is protection of their personal

information. This includes protecting participants' privacy, keeping information confidential, and even allowing the participant to remain anonymous.

Results and Discussion

Researchers typically regard tests as assessment methods in educational settings and are effective tool for enhancing learning. In this reason, the investigation employed tests to help determine the level of learning that the participants achieved throughout the course of study.

Focused on determining changes in performance across targeted outcomes such as recalling the topics pertaining to the course, differentiating difference between linguistic concepts, and pronouncing the segmental phonemes, vowels and consonants.

Table 1. Participants' Level of Post-test Performance in English Language System

PRETEST	SD	Mean	Interpretation
	6.15	39.16	Average

Note: 47.00-70.00 Above Average; 24.00- 46.99 Average; 0-23.99 Below Average

Table 1 shows the pretest academic performance of the students in the subject Introduction to the English Language System subject. As shown in Table 1, the participants obtain a mean score of 39.16. It reveals that the participants of the study have an "average" level of knowledge pertaining to the topics in the subject Introduction to the English Language System. This implies that the students have prior knowledge of the topics. Hence, as pointed out by Olagbaju (2021), prior knowledge is crucial in aiding the recall or transfer of learning, which serves as a platform for the new knowledge. Simply, the participants' prior knowledge served as tool for them to reach the average level as indicated in the pre-test result.

Despite the study participants' status as freshmen in the university, it is considerable that their common interest of joining the BAELS program led them to become competitive as they navigated in adopting with the situation being learners at the university. Therefore, the presence of motivation ignited the study participants to become achievers. As pointed out by Hasan et al. (2020), motivation plays important role in achieving the targeted learning outcomes. In addition, Jiao and Liang (2022) support this contention as they stated that motivation out of intrinsic interest and personal development results to positive impact in English achievement. Hence, this led the participants to this pre-test level of performance in this case.

Table 2. Participants' Level of Post-test Performance in English Language System

POST TEST	SD	Mean	Interpretation
	4.14	54.32	Above Average

Note: 47.00-70.00 Above Average; 24.00- 46.99 Average; 0-23.99 Below Average

Table 2 displays the post-test performance of the participants in the course English Language System after exposing the participants to learner-centered method in teaching the lessons. Notably, the participants acquired a mean score 54.32. This means that their level of performance is at above average. Obviously, there is an improvement in their performance when compared to the pre-test result. This result denotes that the utilization of the learner-centered method in teaching Introduction to the English Language System improved the participants' performance as indicated in their post-test result.

The application of learner-centered method in blended learning is a good combination to enhance the participants' competencies. This concept is similar to the findings of Siddiqui et al. (2020) that blended learning somehow has substantial association with other psychological needs such as being more competent and more relatable. Hence, the adoption of blended learning provided the participants the varied

learning spaces. Moreover, this provision of alternative learning spaces became more effective when learner-centered method of teaching became part of the learning process. Hence, the participants gained that autonomous environment in substitution of the controlled environment that promoted the positive learning outcomes. Simply, the result of the study supports the claim of Weimer (2013) that learner-centered methods are the most effective way to teach students. It is because findings indicated that teacher-centered method is not working for a growing number of diverse, student populations because of diverse student needs and learning styles as pointed out by Brown (2003).

However, despite the evident improvement observed between the pre-test and post-test results, it is still imperative to determine if these data warrant for a statistically significant difference. Hence, through the utilization of t-test, the investigation moved further by subjecting both results from pre and posttest into this statistical treatment.

Table 3. Significant difference between the pretest and post test academic performance

LEARNER-CENTERED	N	SD	Mean	t-value	p-value	Decision	Interpretation
PRETEST	19	6.15	39.16	-10.546	.000	Null Hypothesis Rejected	There is a significant difference
POST TEST		4.14	54.32				

In Table 3, it reveals that at 0.05 margin of error, the computed t-value is at -10.546 with a p-value of 0.000. Hence, based on the Fisher's concept of p-value, it is safe to interpret that there is a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest academic performance of the participants.

This result statistically confirms improvement of the participants' performance in accordance with the targeted outcomes through utilization of learner-centered method in the context of blended learning. The study's outcome falls in line with the research made by Arevalo et al. (2020) that teaching strategies greatly influence students' academic performance. This means that among the central elements in the teaching and learning process is the strategy that teachers opt to observe when in the context of instructional delivery. In this

case, it is the learner-centered method under the blended learning landscape of education.

As mentioned by Zhou et al. (2019), through the learner-centered and learner-driven instructional delivery, there is always a chance for learners to gain active learning capabilities and teamwork skills. Meaning to say, because learner-centered method of teaching empowers the learners, they become more engaged in classroom activities even if it is in a blended setting such as the case of the participants in this study. This is why Wenk (2017) mentioned that the more the students engaged to their prior understanding, the more likely they are to learn well and the less likely they are to misinterpret the material they presented.

In addition, the flexibility imposed in a blended learning setting while adopting the

learner-centered method of teaching plays a role in this finding. According to Yan and Li (2021), the malleable instructional delivery along with the integration of an easy-to-use interface in the learning environment greatly help those in the language learning curricula. Meaning, malleability of the learning environment along with the creativity of the learners that are also vital for resiliency (Ramos and Baldespiñosa, 2021) helped the students in this case. Hence, because the participants possessed the flexibility of performing their tasks, which becomes crucial in learner-centered method and coupled with their familiarity with the modality employed by the teacher during instruction, this paved the way to enhance further their targeted competencies.

Conclusion

This study concludes that employing a learner-centered teaching method in a blended learning setting improves the academic performance of the students who are taking up the subject Introduction to the English Language System in a blended learning set-up. Hence, it affirms Piaget's Constructivism theory that people construct their own knowledge through their personal experience. It prepares students for problem solving in complex environments promoting students to be more active in building and creating knowledge individually and socially based on their experiences and interpretations. In particular, this study anchors on Lev Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory that posits that individuals are active participants in the creation of their own knowledge (Schreiber & Valle, 2013).

The results suggest that students learn better if they are active players in their quest for knowledge to foster knowledge construction by activating their prior knowledge. This research adds evidence to the body of knowledge that teaching methods such as learner-centered, when incorporated in classes are valuable elements in delivering lessons. Meaning, teachers become aimlessly projecting information that does not connect with students or engage students if teachers do not apply a method because these encourage interaction, foster connections, and infuse excitement into the delivery of the content. Simply, the teaching

method, like learner-centered, that greatly considers the development of the students' full potential serves as fulcrum in every educative community regardless of what instructional delivery may it be as part of the academic community's dynamic and resilient nature when tested by calamities like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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