New Year, New Focus on Student-Centered Learning

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The new year is a time for making resolutions and setting new goals. What better time to set new teaching goals for our classrooms and students? This month, Teacher's Corner will explore strategies and techniques for improving student-centered and collaborative learning in the English language classroom. Let's start this discussion with a set of resolutions to make our classrooms and lessons more student-centered.

In order to write our resolutions, we need first to recognize what makes a classroom student-centered. Brown and Lee (2015) identify six characteristics of a student-centered classroom. As you read through the list, ask to what extent your classroom shows these characteristics.

- Students have a voice in the routine and work of the classroom. They are able to make decisions about the ways they learn.
- The classroom is a safe space for all learners where they feel supported and comfortable in their learning.
- Students have choice. They work with the teacher in selecting content, topics, and materials that interest and inspire them to learn English.
- In relation to choice, the learning preferences and styles of students are considered in the overall design of the course and day-to-day lessons.
- The language goals and needs of learners are of utmost importance for class design.
- Teachers notice and consider the individual differences of students as a way to better target their goals and needs.

Using these six characteristics as our guide, let us now turn to six specific actions that will help us focus on students in the coming year.

1. Encourage Students' Voice

One of the easiest ways to give students a voice in the classroom is to give them some autonomy in their learning. Encourage group work, pair work, and collaborative and cooperative learning activities. In these kinds of activities, students must do the work to learn, problem-solve, and practice the skills and tasks at hand. Start simply by having one task per class be a group task. Additionally, you can acknowledge the needs and wants of students as individuals by asking them to identify their learning goals. Have each student write down three language goals they hope to achieve by the end of the course. Then ask each student to identify two activities from past classes that they loved and three topics of interest. By doing so, each student has a chance to explain their own language learning goals and interests and feel heard. Any of the above tasks are easily achievable and manageable goals for teachers just starting to focus on student-centered learning and offer a consistent target for those who are already focusing on student-centered learning.

2. Create a Safe Space

Encouragement, support, and kindness go a long way in the language learning classroom. Sometimes a smile or other signal that teachers are listening and want students to do well can give students enough confidence to participate just a little more. Plan to do one of the following each week to facilitate a safe space:

- Check in with students individually. Checking-in could be as simple as asking students how they are feeling as they enter or leave the classroom.
- Spend a few minutes in class doing something fun that builds relationships among students and between the teacher and students. For example, ask a get-to-know-you question of the class and share your own personal response.
- Give positive feedback and praise to every student. Find something to praise even in those students that have difficulty or struggle in the classroom.
- Approach students on their level. Doing this could mean sitting down next to them when talking to them and paying attention to them.

3. Give Students a Choice

Students' motivation increases when they have a say in choosing topics and content. When planning a lesson or unit, offer students choices between readings or activities. For example, if the topic of the unit is American sports, gauge student interest. Would students rather learn about basketball or baseball? What aspect of the sport most interests them? If some students are interested in the rules of play while others are interested in fan culture, divide the lesson and tasks to fit the interests of all students.

4. Consider Learning Preferences and Styles

Students utilize all of their learning preferences and styles in various combinations and degrees of intensity throughout the learning process; however, some students prefer and excel in different learning contexts when they use particular preferences or styles. For example, at times, some students might prefer to acquire new information using a hands-on approach. To learn the rules of baseball, some students might want to play the game immediately while others might want to read through the rules before playing the game. As a teacher, take time to notice these preferences, and ask students what they prefer to do with regard to a particular task or activity.
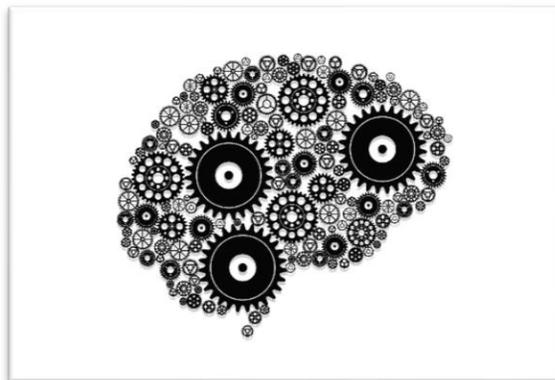
5. Evaluate Students' Language Learning Goals and Needs

At the beginning of any course, teachers must consider the goals and needs of learners in order to plan a course that will be useful, relevant, and appealing to the class. Teachers can start this process by asking some basic questions of their students. In this new year, devise some questions that get at students' goals and needs. Here are a few questions to get the process started:
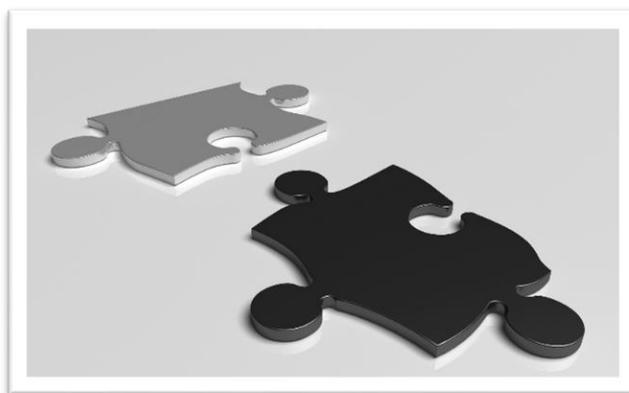
- Why do you want to learn English?
- What would you like to learn to do with English? For example, do you want to speak to English-speaking friends?
- How much English have you studied?
- What is your strongest skill in English: speaking, reading, writing, or listening?

In foreign language classrooms or beginning-level classes, such questions can be conducted in the first language of learners in order to get the most out of the discussion. Think about what questions you might add to this list in order to find out more about your students.

6. Recognize Individual Differences Among Students

At times teachers must address the needs of the entire class but also continue to recognize that the class is made up of individuals. In order to make it a student-centered class, teachers must take time to recognize those individuals and their diverse needs. What language level differences are present among students? How do individual students participate, learn, and act differently in the classroom? What weaknesses and strengths does each student bring to the classroom? How can those strengths be maximized to benefit the individual student and the entire class? How can the weaknesses of individual students be acknowledged and targeted to support language learning? Make a plan to see each student as an individual in this new year. How will you harness the power of your students' many differences to improve the student focus in your classroom?

The new year is a lovely time to start anew in our personal and professional lives. Let's try to make some positive changes in our language classrooms in this new season. When considering the student-centered classroom, teachers must remember to emphasize the needs of the students in every form. Set out to give them support, autonomy, and agency in addition to your own role as teacher and facilitator.

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https://www.facebook.com/groups/AETeachersCorner/. Please answer all three questions completely. You will not be accepted into the group unless you answer the questions.

This article was written by contributing author Melissa Mendelson for AE Teacher's Corner.

Reference:

Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. (2015). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (4th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.