

## Exploring Student-Centered Approaches in English Language Teaching: A case study at To Ky secondary school

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**ABSTRACT:** This research aimed to explore the application of student-centered learning in the teaching of English language at To Ky Secondary School, as well as the effects of this method on students' learning engagement. This research was based on a case study design, where 40 students and three teachers of English language at the school formed the participants. Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including questionnaires, observations, and interviews, were used. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the rest was analyzed through thematic data analysis. From the research, it was evident that the use of student-centered learning, including activities such as group discussions, role plays, pair work, and project work, had a significant effect on students' learning engagement. Students had positive attitudes towards interactive learning activities, especially on improving their speaking skills and learning motivation. However, teachers noted that the application of student-centered learning was effective in promoting learning engagement, but there was a need to consider the large class sizes and varying students' competence.

**Keywords:** *student-centered learning, English language teaching, active learning, student engagement, EFL secondary education*

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1 Background of the Study***

English has become one of the most significant global languages in terms of education, international communication, and professional growth. It has also become a fundamental skill for students in various countries, such as Vietnam, as it allows them to access global knowledge, pursue higher education opportunities, and collaborate in international cooperation (Crystal, 2012). As such, enhancing the quality of English language teaching (ELT) has become a major focus in various education reform initiatives. The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has stressed the need to develop communicative competence and learner autonomy through modern methodologies in accordance with the National Foreign Language Project and the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

Traditionally, the teaching of the English language in most secondary schools has been dominated by teacher-centered learning, where the teacher transmits the required knowledge through lecturing, while the students are only required to listen, take notes, and engage in grammatical exercises. While this method might assist students in developing some linguistic knowledge, it does not allow students adequate room for effective communication and language practice (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Due to these inadequacies, learning scholars and experts have increasingly advocated for the use of student-centered learning, where students are at the core of the learning process and are required to construct the required knowledge through interacting, cooperating, and solving problems (Brown, 2007).

Student-centered learning is directly related to the concept of active learning, where students are actively engaged, motivated, and autonomous in the learning process. Active learning methods, such as the use of discussions, role plays, and project-based learning, have been found to enhance students' motivation in learning the English language (Prince, 2004). By actively involving students in the learning process, student-centered learning can create an interactive learning environment where

students are actively engaged in learning and are thus required to take charge of their learning.

### ***1.2 Problem Statement***

However, it seems that the traditional way of teaching the English language still dominates the classrooms of secondary schools. The teacher seems to be more focused on teaching the grammar rules of the language, translating texts, and preparing the students for written tests. The communicative activities and the opportunities for collaborative learning seem to be scarce. It is not easy for the students to improve their language skills, especially the speaking and listening skills.

Another major problem that has been identified is the low rate of student participation during the English language classes. The traditional way of teaching the English language seems to have influenced the students to be passive learners. The students seem not to have the opportunities to practice the language and be active participants. It would be interesting to explore the effectiveness of the student-centered way of teaching the English language and the impact it has on the students' engagement.

### ***1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions***

This study aims to investigate the implementation and effectiveness of student-centered approaches in English language teaching at To Ky Secondary School. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how student-centered teaching methods are applied in English classes, examine students' engagement in student-centered learning activities, and evaluate the extent to which these approaches contribute to improved English learning outcomes.

To achieve the research objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are student-centered approaches implemented in English classes at To Ky Secondary School?
2. How do students perceive student-centered learning activities in English lessons?

3. What impact do student-centered approaches have on students' engagement in English language learning?

#### ***1.4 Significance and scope of the Study***

The study is expected to make a contribution to the ever-expanding literature on student-centered learning in English language education. It is believed that the findings of the study will give useful insights into the effectiveness of learner-centered pedagogical approaches in the context of secondary schools in Vietnam. Moreover, the study will give useful insights to English language teachers who are interested in adopting learner-centered pedagogical approaches in their classrooms. Finally, the study will give useful insights to curriculum developers and policymakers who are interested in incorporating learner-centered pedagogical approaches in English language education.

The study was carried out at To Ky Secondary School, and the research was conducted in English language classrooms in which learner-centered approaches were implemented. In this study, English teachers and learners who are directly involved in the teaching and learning process in English classrooms were selected as participants. Data collection was carried out during the academic year, and the findings of the study will give useful insights to English language teachers and learners in this particular context due to the limited scope of the study.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 The Concept of Student-Centered Learning***

On the other hand, student-centered learning has emerged as an important concept of learning in the contemporary education system, especially in language classrooms where the interaction and communication of students with each other and the teacher are vital. Student-centered learning is different from the traditional teacher-centered model of learning, where the teacher is considered the primary source of knowledge and the center of the teaching-learning process. Student-centered learning focuses more on the active involvement and role of the learners in the construction of their own knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, as proposed by Brown (2007).

It has been defined by different researchers from different points of view. According to Weimer (2013), student-centered learning can be defined as the instructional techniques used to move the center of activity from the teacher to the students and enable them to take more responsibility for their own processes of learning. Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003) have also defined student-centered learning as an approach to the teaching-learning process that promotes autonomy, critical thinking, and active involvement of the learners.

Several characteristics of student-centered learning set it apart from other learning methodologies. First, it fosters participation through interactive learning activities. Second, it fosters autonomy among students, where students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning goals and learning strategies. Third, student-centered learning recognizes the role of collaboration and interaction among students as integral components of learning. Lastly, student-centered learning is based on learning experiences that are related to real-life situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In English language teaching (ELT), student-centered learning is essential because language acquisition involves learning opportunities where students frequently interact with one another. Through interaction and use of the target language, students can develop communicative competence and confidence in language use (Harmer, 2007). Thus, it is essential for language teaching methodologies to embrace student-centered learning for an effective and engaging learning environment.

## ***2.2 Theoretical Foundations***

One of the most influential theories that support student-centered learning is the constructivist theory. The constructivist theory is based on the constructivist perspective that knowledge is not transmitted by the teacher but is instead constructed by the student based on their interaction with the environment (Piaget, 1972). The constructivist theory is based on the constructivist perspective that learning happens when individuals construct new knowledge with their existing knowledge.

The other influential theory that supports student-centered learning, which focuses on the importance of student interaction, is the sociocultural theory, which was introduced by Vygotsky (1978). According to this theory, the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was coined, which means the difference between what the student can learn independently and what the student can learn with the help of the teacher. In the context of student-centered learning, the interaction between the students will help the students learn within their zone.

In the context of the language classroom, the constructivist theory supports the pedagogical practices that focus on problem-solving activities, collaborative learning, and authentic communication, which is why most contemporary ELT approaches have incorporated the constructivist theory.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is another major theory that has greatly influenced student-centered approaches to ELT. CLT emerged in the 1970s as a response to the limitations of traditional approaches to language education, which focused on the explicit teaching of grammar rules and accuracy in language use. The primary objective of CLT is to facilitate the development of learners' communicative competence, which entails the ability to communicate in an effective and appropriate manner in real-life contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980).

CLT emphasizes the importance of authentic communication activities, pair work, group discussions, and role plays in the context of language education. These activities encourage learners to actively engage in the target language to convey their ideas and interact with other learners. The role of the teacher in CLT is to facilitate the development of learners' communicative skills, not to explain the rules of grammar (Richards, 2006).

The principles of CLT are similar to those of student-centered learning because they focus on learner participation and interaction. The use of CLT promotes a learning environment that encourages learners to be involved in language acquisition. This approach has been widely implemented in different education systems around the world, including Vietnam, with the aim of enhancing students' communicative competence in English language acquisition.

The active learning theory is also a theoretical base for implementing student-centered learning. Active learning is a teaching approach that involves learners in activities that help them think critically about what they are doing (Prince, 2004). Learners are not just passive listeners of what is being taught in class; instead, they are involved in discussions and activities that help them learn and understand better.

Studies have shown that this approach is effective in improving students' engagement, interest, and academic performance. Bonwell and Eison (1991) note that using active learning approaches encourages students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information learned, as opposed to memorizing it. These processes are effective in helping learners learn and retain information better than memorization.

In language classrooms, active learning often involves communicative activities, cooperative learning tasks, and project-based assignments. Such activities create opportunities for students to practice language skills in authentic contexts while developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. As a result, active learning is widely recognized as a key component of effective student-centered teaching.

### ***2.3 Student-Centered Approaches in English Language Teaching***

There are several ways to employ student-centered learning in ELT. Three of the most popular methods used in ELT are collaborative learning, project-based learning, and task-based learning.

Collaborative learning focuses on the idea that learners can learn together in a group to attain learning objectives. In collaborative learning environments, learners can share ideas with one another and support each other's learning processes. Johnson & Johnson (2009) state that collaborative learning can have a positive impact on learners' academic performance, as well as their personal and motivational development.

In ELT environments, collaborative learning can be achieved in several ways. For instance, learners can be involved in pair work, group discussions, role plays, and feedback. Collaborative learning can give learners opportunities to learn language in a meaningful context. Collaborative learning can be very effective in developing learners' fluency.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is another student-centered learning theory that focuses on the idea that learners can learn in a meaningful context by working on meaningful projects. In PBL environments, learners can be involved in projects that require research to present findings to the class.

PBL activities in English language classrooms could involve activities such as making presentations, developing multimedia presentations, and undertaking group research on selected topics of interest. These activities are likely to enhance learner autonomy and promote the use of English language for authentic purposes.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a teaching approach that emphasizes the use of meaningful tasks as a fundamental unit of teaching and learning. Ellis (2003) defines a task as an activity that involves learners in using language to accomplish a particular outcome or goal. TBLT does not lay much emphasis on grammar teaching.

In TBLT classrooms, learners are involved in undertaking tasks such as problem-solving tasks, information gap tasks, and role-playing tasks. These tasks are likely to encourage learners to use language for authentic purposes and enhance communicative competence and fluency.

#### ***2.4 Previous Studies***

Much research has been devoted to the effectiveness of student-centered models in language education settings. International research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of student-centered models for increasing student engagement, language proficiency, and motivation to learn. Active learning techniques, which are an integral part of student-centered models, have been recognized as an effective model for increasing students' academic performance. For instance, Prince (2004) undertook a comprehensive review of the literature on active learning techniques and found that instructional models that encourage student participation and interaction increase academic performance more than traditional models. Similarly, Freeman et al. (2014) undertook a meta-analysis of 225 studies and found that active learning techniques decrease failure rates and increase academic achievement in various disciplines, including language education.

In the context of second language acquisition, there are many researchers who have stressed the role of interactive and communicative learning conditions in second language acquisition. In this context, Dörnyei (2001) has stressed that learner-centered activities play a vital role in the development of learners' motivation and eagerness to participate in second language learning processes. When learners are encouraged to use meaningful language, they can develop more confidence and communicative ability in using the target language. Similarly, Ellis (2003) has stressed that task-based language learning can help learners develop their language learning abilities through meaningful and communicative activities. In this context, the research study carried out by Long (2015) supports the idea that learner-centered activities can help learners develop deeper processing abilities in second language learning processes.

Project-based learning and collaborative learning have also been widely studied in English language teaching. Thomas (2000) found that project-based learning enhances students' critical thinking skills, collaboration, and learner autonomy by engaging them in meaningful projects that connect language learning with real-life contexts. Similarly, Stoller (2006) emphasized that project-based instruction provides opportunities for learners to integrate multiple language skills while developing research and presentation abilities. Collaborative learning strategies, including group work and peer interaction, have also been found to promote higher levels of engagement and communicative practice in language classrooms (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

In addition to global research, a growing number of studies have investigated the application of student-centered approaches in English language teaching within the Vietnamese context. With the implementation of educational reforms such as the National Foreign Language Project and the 2018 General Education Curriculum, Vietnamese educators have increasingly adopted communicative and learner-centered teaching methods (MOET, 2018). Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) found that communicative teaching activities significantly improved students' speaking skills and classroom participation in Vietnamese secondary schools. The study indicated that when teachers implemented interactive tasks such as role-playing and group

discussions, students demonstrated greater confidence and willingness to use English in classroom interactions.

Similarly, research conducted by Nguyen (2018) examined the effectiveness of cooperative learning in Vietnamese EFL classrooms and reported that collaborative learning activities improved students' language proficiency as well as their interpersonal communication skills. Another study by Pham (2020) explored the use of project-based learning in English language classrooms and found that students participating in project-based activities showed higher levels of motivation and engagement compared with those taught through traditional teacher-centered methods. The study also highlighted that project-based learning helped students develop important skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and presentation abilities.

Furthermore, Tran and Duong (2018) investigated the implementation of task-based language teaching in Vietnamese high schools and found that task-based activities significantly improved students' speaking performance and communicative competence. The researchers concluded that task-based instruction can create more authentic and meaningful learning experiences for students, thereby enhancing language acquisition. Likewise, Pham and Renshaw (2015) emphasized that student-centered pedagogical approaches can help Vietnamese learners overcome passivity in traditional classrooms by encouraging active participation and collaborative learning.

Despite the positive outcomes reported in many studies, the implementation of student-centered teaching approaches in Vietnam still faces several challenges. One of the most commonly reported issues is the large class size in many public schools, which makes it difficult for teachers to organize interactive activities effectively (Nguyen, 2018). In addition, the examination-oriented education system often prioritizes grammar knowledge and test preparation rather than communicative competence, which may discourage teachers from adopting innovative teaching methods (Le & Barnard, 2009). Limited teaching resources, insufficient teacher training, and time constraints are also frequently cited as barriers to the successful implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in Vietnamese classrooms.

Overall, previous research indicates that student-centered learning approaches can significantly improve student engagement, motivation, and language proficiency. However, the successful implementation of these approaches depends on contextual factors such as classroom conditions, teacher training, and institutional support. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how student-centered teaching methods can be effectively applied in specific educational contexts, particularly in Vietnamese secondary schools where traditional teaching practices remain prevalent.

## ***2.5 Research Gap***

Although a growing body of research has examined student-centered learning in English language education, there remains a need for more empirical studies focusing on specific school contexts in Vietnam. Many previous studies have concentrated on higher education or large-scale educational reforms, while fewer studies have explored the practical implementation of student-centered approaches in secondary school classrooms.

Furthermore, limited research has examined how these approaches influence students' engagement and perceptions within specific local contexts. Case studies conducted at individual schools can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing student-centered teaching practices.

Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by investigating the application of student-centered approaches in English language teaching at To Ky Secondary School. By examining both teachers' practices and students' experiences, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how learner-centered pedagogy can be implemented effectively in Vietnamese secondary education.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### ***3.1 Research Design***

This study adopts a case study research design to explore the implementation of student-centered approaches in English language teaching at To Ky Secondary School. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating educational practices within a specific real-life context, allowing researchers to obtain in-depth insights into classroom processes and participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). In language

education research, case studies are commonly used to examine teaching methods, learner engagement, and classroom interactions in detail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By focusing on a single school context, this study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how student-centered approaches are applied in English lessons and how they influence students' learning engagement.

### ***3.2 Research Site***

The research was conducted at To Ky Secondary School, a public secondary school located in Vietnam where English is taught as a compulsory subject. The school follows the national English curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and Training and has recently encouraged teachers to apply more communicative and learner-centered teaching strategies in classroom instruction.

### ***3.3 Participants***

The participants in this study included 40 students and 3 English teachers at To Ky Secondary School. The student participants were selected from English classes where student-centered teaching activities were implemented. The three English teachers involved in the study had several years of teaching experience and were responsible for designing and conducting English lessons in the participating classes.

### ***3.4 Data Collection Methods***

To obtain comprehensive data, the study employed multiple data collection methods, including questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to students to collect quantitative data on their perceptions and engagement in student-centered learning activities. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how student-centered approaches were implemented during English lessons. In addition, semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding the use of learner-centered teaching methods.

### ***3.5 Data Analysis Methods***

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive

statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean scores, to identify general trends in students' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify key themes related to teaching practices, student engagement, and learning experiences.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their voluntary consent before participating. In addition, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing any identifying information from the data collected. These measures were taken to protect participants' rights and maintain ethical research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **4.2 Students' Engagement in Learning Activities**

To examine students' engagement in student-centered learning activities, a questionnaire was administered to 40 students. The survey included several items measuring students' participation, interest, and motivation during different classroom activities. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Engagement in Student-Centered Learning Activities

| <b>Activity Type</b>    | <b>Mean Score</b> | <b>Interpretation</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Group discussion        | 4.1               | High engagement       |
| Project-based learning  | 3.9               | High engagement       |
| Role-play activities    | 4.0               | High engagement       |
| Pair work activities    | 4.2               | Very high engagement  |
| Classroom presentations | 3.8               | High engagement       |

The results indicate that students demonstrated a generally high level of engagement in student-centered activities. Among the different activities, pair work activities received the highest mean score (4.2), suggesting that students felt comfortable interacting with their peers in smaller groups. Pair work activities allowed students to

practice English more frequently and reduced the anxiety associated with speaking in front of the whole class.

Group discussions and role-play activities also received high engagement scores (4.1 and 4.0 respectively). These activities provided opportunities for students to express their ideas and practice communicative language skills in a supportive learning environment. Project-based learning and classroom presentations received slightly lower scores, which may be due to the additional preparation and speaking confidence required for these tasks.

Overall, the survey results suggest that student-centered activities successfully promoted active participation and engagement among students in English language lessons.

#### ***4.3 Students' Perceptions of Student-Centered Learning***

In addition to measuring engagement levels, the questionnaire also explored students' perceptions of student-centered learning. Students were asked to evaluate several statements regarding the effectiveness of learner-centered activities in improving their English learning experience. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of Student-Centered Learning

| <b>Statement</b>   | <b>Mean Score</b> | <b>Interpretation</b> |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Student-centered activities make English lessons more interesting  | 4.3               | Very positive         |
| These activities help improve my speaking skills                   | 4.2               | Positive              |
| I feel more confident when participating in group activities       | 4.1               | Positive              |
| I prefer interactive activities to traditional lectures            | 4.0               | Positive              |
| Student-centered activities improve my motivation to learn English | 4.2               | Positive              |

The findings indicate that students generally had positive perceptions of student-centered learning methods. The highest mean score (4.3) was recorded for the

statement that student-centered activities make English lessons more interesting. This result suggests that interactive teaching strategies can significantly increase students' enjoyment and engagement in language learning.

Similarly, students reported that these activities helped improve their speaking skills and increased their confidence when communicating in English. This finding is particularly important because speaking ability is often considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners. Through group discussions and role-play tasks, students were able to practice speaking in a supportive and less stressful environment.

Another notable result is that many students expressed a preference for interactive learning activities over traditional teacher-centered lectures. This indicates that learner-centered teaching approaches may be more effective in maintaining students' motivation and interest in language learning.

#### ***4.4 Teachers' Perspectives***

Interviews with the three participating English teachers also provided valuable insights into the implementation of student-centered approaches. Overall, the teachers reported that student-centered teaching strategies helped create a more interactive and engaging classroom environment. They observed that students were more willing to participate in English lessons when activities involved collaboration and communication.

One teacher noted that group discussions and pair work activities allowed students to practice English more frequently compared to traditional lecture-based lessons. Another teacher highlighted that project-based tasks encouraged students to develop additional skills such as teamwork, research, and presentation abilities. However, the teachers also mentioned several challenges when implementing student-centered methods.

One common challenge was the large class size, which sometimes made it difficult to manage group activities effectively. Additionally, some students were initially hesitant to participate in communicative tasks due to limited language proficiency or

lack of confidence. Despite these challenges, the teachers agreed that student-centered teaching approaches were beneficial for promoting active learning and improving students' communication skills.

#### ***4.5 Discussion***

The findings of this study support previous research highlighting the benefits of student-centered learning in language education. The high levels of student engagement observed in this study are consistent with the findings of Prince (2004), who reported that active learning strategies significantly increase student participation and academic performance. Similarly, Freeman et al. (2014) found that interactive learning activities improve students' learning outcomes and reduce passive learning behaviors.

The positive student perceptions identified in this study also align with the work of Dörnyei (2001), who emphasized the importance of motivational learning environments in language classrooms. When students participate in communicative and collaborative tasks, they are more likely to develop confidence and motivation in using the target language.

In the Vietnamese context, the findings are consistent with studies conducted by Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) and Pham (2020), which demonstrated that student-centered teaching methods can improve students' speaking skills and classroom participation. However, similar to previous research, this study also identified practical challenges such as large class sizes and varying student proficiency levels.

Overall, the results suggest that student-centered approaches can play a significant role in improving student engagement and learning outcomes in English language teaching. By creating opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaborative learning, these approaches can help students develop both linguistic competence and confidence in using English.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study explored the implementation of student-centered approaches in ELT at To Ky Secondary School and examined their impact on students' engagement and

perceptions of learning. The findings indicate that the integration of interactive activities such as group discussions, role-play tasks, pair work, and project-based learning contributed to creating a more dynamic and engaging classroom environment. These teaching strategies encouraged students to actively participate in learning activities, communicate with peers, and apply English in meaningful contexts. As a result, students demonstrated higher levels of engagement and interest in English lessons compared with traditional teacher-centered instruction.

The survey results showed that students generally had positive perceptions of student-centered learning activities. Many participants reported that interactive classroom activities made English lessons more interesting and helped them improve their speaking skills and communication confidence. These findings suggest that learner-centered teaching approaches can effectively enhance students' motivation and participation in language learning. In addition, the interviews with teachers revealed that student-centered strategies not only supported language development but also promoted collaborative learning and critical thinking skills among students.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified several challenges in implementing student-centered approaches in secondary school classrooms. Factors such as large class sizes, limited classroom time, and differences in students' language proficiency may affect the effectiveness of these teaching methods. Teachers therefore need appropriate training, institutional support, and flexible teaching strategies to successfully apply learner-centered pedagogy in practice.

Overall, the findings of this study support previous research highlighting the benefits of student-centered learning in English language education. By encouraging active participation, interaction, and collaboration, student-centered approaches can significantly improve students' learning experiences and language competence. Future studies may further investigate the long-term impact of these teaching strategies and explore how technology-enhanced learning environments can support the implementation of student-centered pedagogy in English language classrooms.

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