Comparing Teacher-Focused and Learner-Focused Language Classrooms

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Abstract
The two most common types of language classrooms are the traditional teacher focused and learner focused approaches. This teacher-focused classroom works well with languages that are offered annually and the learner-focused classroom works well with on-demand offerings. This paper examines the workings of both approaches and compares their effectiveness in meeting learner demand.

Assessing the needs of the learner population

Undergraduate needs
Every language program needs to determine the language needs of all potential learners. At Michigan State University we find that we have two distinct groups with separate language needs. The largest group is the undergraduate population and while they do not represent a large percentage of the language learning population on campus, they represent the major source of enrollments in our program. For the most part these students are meeting a language requirement or are interested in learning more about an African culture through its language, be they heritage learners or others who have acquired an interest in language. For these students one or two years of language study are usually sufficient, either to meet the language requirement or their interest in the culture associated with the language. In most cases these learners want to study a widely spoken African language which is typically Swahili, Hausa, Zulu, Xhosa, Yoruba or Bamana.

Graduate Needs
In our program, as with all programs with US Department of Education support for Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (FLAS) fellowships, a second population of graduate students has a different set of needs. These students have applied for and received a FLAS to study a specific African language which they plan to use in their doctoral field research. Thus the highest need for these graduate students is the specific African language and for that language usable fluency level. To achieve this level, they will need three years of instruction. As graduate students, they are in less need of a highly structured environment than are undergraduates.

Thus, we see two different learner populations with very different needs and expectations as is shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Undergraduate Priority</th>
<th>Graduate Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured learning environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parameters in the design of the learning environment

The terminology used to describe the design of the language learning environment has been vague and inconsistent. In this section, I offer the following description of the parameters involved in this environment: offering mode, the type of language offering, classroom size, focus, personnel, and pedagogical practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Size</th>
<th>Offering Mode</th>
<th>Languages Offered</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Personnel (learner + X)</th>
<th>Pedagogical Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large (21-100)</td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Fixed Listing</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Grammar Driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (5-20)</td>
<td>On-Demand</td>
<td>Menu Listing</td>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Supervisor/Tutor</td>
<td>Communicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (1-4)</td>
<td>Biannual</td>
<td>Open Listing</td>
<td>Self-Directed</td>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classroom size

University classes vary in size and often have policies on how large or small classes may be. In some cases the university administration may cancel the class when a class is too small because of costs. This is a common problem with the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) because they typically have lower enrollment levels and often a greater annual variation. But while there has been a good deal of discussion on class size and cost, there has been very little discussion of class size and learning effectiveness and even less empirical research on this topic. Most language teachers would set the upper limit for effective teaching at 15 students per class, though some have argued for even lower levels.¹

Offering mode

The annual offering mode is cost effective when there is a steady demand for the languages being offered but costs rise as class size diminishes. The problem becomes even more severe when enrolment varies from year to year as is often the case with the LCTLs. The model is even more cost ineffective in the case of responding to graduate FLAS needs when class enrollments are extremely low and variability is extremely high. This situation has led to an alternative mode of offering, such as the one at Michigan State University, in which the program offers individualized instruction on an on-demand basis. Other modes have also been developed

¹ Zarker’s (2000) review of the literature suggests that there is no evidence to suggest that larger class size has a negative effect on language learning though suggests that better studies are needed.
such as the alternate year model in which one language is offered at the beginning level on even-numbered years, and another language is offered at the beginning level on odd-numbered years.

Focus

The annual offering class involves a teacher who will be teaching a given set of language classes, year in and year out. In this case, it makes sense to focus on the teacher, providing him or her with pedagogical training and classroom management skills. In the on-demand mode, however, teachers will be engaged on an as-needed basis, and as a result it makes sense to focus on the learner, rather than the temporary teacher in providing the skills necessary to learn the language. The concept of a learner-focused classroom is new and for some incomprehensible and for this reason I elaborate how a learner focused classroom works. In the learner-focused approach, the emphasis is on the training of the learner to learn and to make classroom decisions about the management of the class. The question of focus is different from the learner-centered distinction which is one in which teachers strive to respond to learner needs and interest a task which is much easier when classes are small.

Languages offered

For the annual offering mode, languages are offered as a fixed set whereas in the on-demand mode will be select from a finite (menu) or open-ended listing. Finally, they can be offered in an open listing usually dependent on the availability of learning resources. At Michigan State University we provide a finite list of language choices based on the availability of learning resources (materials and teachers) and expertise of the language supervisor.

Personnel

The teacher-focused classroom consists of a trained teacher and several learners. In this type of classroom, the teacher is responsible for the major decisions of the classroom, the materials used, the syllabus design, the lesson plans, the writing of exams, and the pedagogical approach.

The learner-focused classroom, consists of a language supervisor (who works with the learner and tutor to construct a learning environment), a tutor (who is fluent in the language being studied and a learner but not necessarily trained in language pedagogy or classroom management), and a learner.

How an On-Demand, Learner-Focused classroom works

The on-demand language menu

The African language program at Michigan State University has established a menu from which learners may choose on demand for languages. This list of languages, shown below, was determined on the basis of 1) the importance
of the language, 2) the availability of learning materials for the language, 3) and whether there is a supervisor who has a structural knowledge of the language. The actual offering is also based on the awarding of a FLAS fellowship and the availability of a tutor. By using a predetermined menu, we can insure the quality of the on-demand offerings.

**Michigan State University on-demand African language menu**


**Expected proficiency**

Almost all FLAS awardees achieve an ACTFL proficiency of advanced after three years of study, which is the maximum number of years allowed each learner. At this level, a learner can continue to learn on his or her own and can begin to interview people in the language.

**Scheduling**

At any one time, we usually have five different language classes at different levels of study. Each year we normally begin two new classes and continue four others. If there is greater demand, other faculty members, with the appropriate linguistic expertise will be asked to assist. The table below illustrates how the language classes work through the system from year to year. Because the first year class is just beginning to develop a learning environment, the language supervisor will spend more time with this class, sometimes two visits per week, than with the advanced classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Track 1</td>
<td>Shona 3</td>
<td>Yoruba 1</td>
<td>Yoruba 2</td>
<td>Yoruba 3</td>
<td>Akan 1</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 2</td>
<td>Akan 3</td>
<td>Akan 1</td>
<td>Akan 2</td>
<td>Akan 3</td>
<td>Zulu 1</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 3</td>
<td>Fula 2</td>
<td>Fula 3</td>
<td>Amharic 1</td>
<td>Amharic 2</td>
<td>Amharic 3</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 4</td>
<td>Wolof 2</td>
<td>Wolof 3</td>
<td>Shona 1</td>
<td>Shona 2</td>
<td>Shona 3</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 5</td>
<td>Bamana 1</td>
<td>Bamana 2</td>
<td>Bamana 3</td>
<td>Shona 1</td>
<td>Shona 2</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track 6</td>
<td>Fula 1</td>
<td>Fula 2</td>
<td>Fula 3</td>
<td>Wolof 1</td>
<td>Wolof 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personnel**

Unlike the teacher-focused classroom, the learner-focused classroom replaces the teacher with a language supervisor and a tutor and shifts the focus of training from the teacher to the learner and tutor.

**About the tutor**

The tutor\(^2\) has been selected because of his or her fluency in the language to be studied. Typically the tutor is a student working on an advanced degree

\(^2\) Several other terms have been suggested for the word tutor, such as language model, but none of these seems to me to convey the activities as well as the term “tutor.”
in an academic unit in the university. The tutor is not expected to be trained
in the teaching of the language but is expected to be cooperative and to
learn about language teaching and learning from the language supervisor.

About the learner

Because the tutor is engaged on an on-demand basis for the specific
language, it makes more sense to focus on the learner with respect to
pedagogical training and classroom management, for the learner will use
this training as part of his or her life-long learning experience with the
language. In this classroom, the learner, with advice from the language
supervisor and the tutor, is encouraged to make decisions about the goals
for the semester, the materials used, the types of classroom activities to be
used, the design of the lesson plans and learning strategy. ³

At Michigan State University, we restrict the learner-focused, on-demand
program to graduate learners. We have found that graduate learners are
better able to work in this type of classroom for a number of reasons
summarized in the adjacent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of study</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous language</td>
<td>Usually no</td>
<td>Usually yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average GPA</td>
<td>2.5 (C+/B-)</td>
<td>3.5 (B+/A-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturity</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Structuring</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, they are more highly motivated, for they need the language of
study to successfully complete their field work. Thirdly they are, as
graduate students more mature. And lastly, they have undergone two
competitive selection processes, first from a pool of graduate student
applicants for their field of study and second from a pool of applicants for a
FLAS fellowship to study an African language. Both of these selections result
in more mature, more highly motivated students with higher GPAs than the
undergraduate language student.

About the supervisor

The table on the following page shows the differences between the
management responsibilities in a teacher-focused and a learner-focused
classroom. As can be seen, in the teacher-focused classroom, the teacher is
responsible for making decisions about the textbook, the syllabus, the
pedagogical approach, the assignments and the exam while the student is
responsible for doing the assignments and evaluating the teacher at the end

³ At the beginning of each semester, the student submits a semester plan which includes a
statement of goals, material to be covered and a weekly schedule showing the kinds of
activities used.
of the course. In the learner-focused classroom the learner is truly the focus of the learning program. The tutor and the language supervisor work to develop with the learner a learning environment best suited to that particular learner.

**Table 1: Comparison of Teacher-focused and Learner-focused Classrooms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Function</th>
<th>Teacher-focused</th>
<th>Learner-focused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogical</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Primary Recipient</td>
<td>Primary Decider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>The language supervisor provides in-class training to both the learner and language tutor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Structure And Design</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weekly Plan</strong></td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson Plan</strong></td>
<td>Primary Determiner</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Student fills out Evaluation Form</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Assigns Homework</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Writes Exams</td>
<td>Facilitator and Tutor construct exams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Teacher provides feedback on exams and homework</td>
<td>The one-on-one tutor allows constant and immediate feedback on learner’s performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Assignment</td>
<td>Supervisor in consultation with tutor assign grade.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Goals Done by Teacher</td>
<td>The adjustment of goals is made following the review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Style</td>
<td>Done by teacher</td>
<td>Class structure and design are adjusted to meet learning styles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The language supervisor is key to the success of the learner-focused classroom. The language supervisor needs to have two distinct areas of expertise: an understanding of language learning pedagogy including

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4 The teacher-focused classroom can also be learner centered, though many are not, but it cannot be learner focused, because the teacher is given the responsibility of class management.
classroom management techniques, and a structural knowledge of the language being studied so that the supervisor can help the learner (and the tutor) understand the grammatical workings of the language.

The logic of the learner-focused classroom is that the learner is not only the acquirer of language data but that the learner is also in command of the language learning strategy. Thus, the role of the language supervisor is not one of teaching but one of helping the learner and the tutor in the process of acquisition. In addition, the supervisor is responsible for some of the activities of the teacher as the following list shows.

1) Locates and selects the tutor for the program.
2) Guides the learner and tutor in developing goals and a syllabus for the entire semester.
3) Visits each class at least once a week. This may be more frequent during the first semester of study.
   a) During this period, the supervisor observes what is going on in the class including the types of activities undertaken and their correspondence to the syllabus, how well the activities are being done, the use of English during the class, the involvement of the tutor and the learner in these activities and how well these activities are helping to meet the learner’s goals.
   b) The supervisor also asks the tutor and learner about the activities involved and how well (or poorly) they have worked out and if they see any problems. On the basis of the observations and responses from the tutor and learner, the supervisor suggests adjustments in the way the activities are carried out or even different activities which will address the same goals. The supervisor acts as a facilitator offering suggestions based on his/her training in language teaching and learning techniques on how to adjust class procedures to produce a more productive learning environment.
4) The supervisor examines the types of homework being done for the class and may if needed suggest alternative exercises.
5) The supervisor also answers questions about the grammatical properties of the language as they arise. Some may have to do with hearing or producing phonological distinctions in the language. Most typical problems have to do with tonal distinctions common to most African language, the distinction between long and short consonants and vowels, implosives, and labial velar stops. Other problems may have to do with grammatical properties of the languages. Most typical grammatical problems have to do with the noun-class systems common to most African languages and the tense-aspect systems. Occasionally word meanings not common to English also arise, such as the rather common use, in West Africa, of the meaning “to surpass” to indicative
comparatives, definite articles that are not really definite and the distinction between here, there, and yonder.

6) The language supervisor also with the help of the tutor devise tests and exams (both oral and written) to provide a check on what is being done in class.

**A comparison of Teacher- and Learner-Focused classrooms**

**Cost**

The primary cost of a teacher-focused classroom is the teacher salary. In some institutions this may be a tenured faculty, while at others it may be a “specialist” hired on an annual basis without tenure or a graduate assistant. Typically language programs hire someone to teach two or three levels each year. The cost associated with an on-demand tutorial involves the salary of a faculty supervisor who can supervise a maximum of six language courses a year plus the cost of a tutor who is typically hired on an hourly basis. Cost calculations show that the on-demand mode, when operating at maximum capacity (six classes per semester) cost about 50% more to operate.

**Pedagogical practice**

Any language classroom is open to a large variety of pedagogical practices from grammar driven to communication driven approaches. At Michigan State University we use a hybrid of both as is explained in “Developing a Rationale for African Language Tutorials” (Dwyer 1999). This document is also available from me upon request.

**Comparing the Teacher-Focused and Learning-Focused Classroom**

Because the teacher-focused classroom is viewed as the standard way to learn language, many language teaching professionals are suspicious of the learner-focused mode. This section addresses the relative merits of each mode with the conclusion that both are effective means of language learning but are appropriate in different situations.

**Learning proficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level: Year</th>
<th>Total Classroom Hours</th>
<th>ACTFL Proficiency Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning: First Year</td>
<td>150 hours</td>
<td>Intermediate low/mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate: Second Year</td>
<td>300 hours</td>
<td>Intermediate high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced: Third Year</td>
<td>390 hours</td>
<td>Advanced*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most important concern that educators have is whether the learner-focused classroom produces the same level of learner proficiency. Although there has been little published research on this topic, we find that both the teacher-focused and the learner-focused approaches achieve the same level of language proficiency. At Michigan State University we have set proficiency goals for each year of study. Most importantly, we expect our graduate students who are enrolled in the on-demand, learner-focused
classes to achieve an ACTFL\textsuperscript{5} level of advanced. At this proficiency level, users can manage daily encounters, can narrate in the past and future, can interview others without the assistance of an interpreter and can continue learning on their own – in short, have the ability to conduct field research independently.

On the basis of our exit proficiency interviews, using a modified version of the ACTFL approach (Dwyer and Hipel (1988) we have found that graduate learners who complete three years of study do achieve the ACTFL advanced level.

\textit{Reasons for success}

These results show that the learner-focused supervised tutorial is at least as effective as the traditional teacher-focused classroom. At first, this may seem hard to believe given that the teacher-focused classroom has many advantages including trained teachers, language specific learning materials and substantial additional support literature. However, the learner-focused mode has several compensatory advantages including learner participation in the course design, one-on-one instruction, instant feedback, learning with a natural syllabus, and as pointed out above highly sophisticated and highly motivated language learners. It is also important that because the learner is part of the language learning decision making, the transition from the classroom to self-instruction is more easily made when compared to the teacher-managed classroom.

\textit{Conclusions}

There has been a tendency to consider the teacher-focused classroom as the ideal way to learn language and consequently that the tutorial mode was a less desirable mode of learning. After some thirty years of supervising African language tutorials I have come to the conclusion that the learner-focused, supervised tutorial is an effective alternative to the teacher-focused classroom and is very well suited to the on-demand system of offering that arises in graduate programs that support study for field research in Africa.

This view challenges the traditional view that the only way languages can be learned effectively is through the teacher-focused classroom with its well-trained teachers and professionally developed textbooks and other learning materials. Several other factors contribute to the success of the supervised, learner focused tutorials including, high learner motivation, a one-on-one learning environment (which allows for instant feedback), and a learner-focused format (which permits greater learner awareness of and

\textsuperscript{5} The American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has established a reliable procedure to evaluate oral proficiency by establishing a set of stages (novice, intermediate, advanced and superior) and a trained evaluator. For more information see http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3325.
involvement in the learning process), the individualizing of the learning process including the natural syllabus and the ability to revise lesson design following in-class evaluation of progress.

References cited or relevant to the article


