A Learner-Centred Approach to Languge Teaching and its Place in the Thai Context

Diana-Lee Simon
Faculty of Education
Chulalongkorn University

Abstract

This paper begins by examining the origins of the teaching and learning relationship in Thailand and shows how it is traditionally a teacher-centred one. It goes on to review the changing language methodologies originating in America and Europe over the past fifty years, showing how language teaching in Thailand has been influenced by them and how the move has been from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred one. The principles of a learner-centred approach are made explicit, showing the change it implies for the role of the teacher. Finally, this paper raises the question of the suitability of such an approach in the Thai context.

Teaching Methodology and Cultural Tradition

Since teaching and learning are essentially social activities, teacher and learner function according to the norms or social rules operating in their society. In the case of foreign language teaching, teacher and learner may belong to different social groups, if the foreign language teacher is a native speaker teaching students of a different culture. However, the scope of this paper is limited to teachers and learners sharing a common culture, since this is the most frequent case in Thai educational institutions, where Thai teachers and instructors are mainly responsible for foreign language teaching in schools and universities throughout the country.

If pedagogical innovation is to be meaningful and successful, it is essential to take into consideration the specific nature of the pedagogical tradition operating in a given context.

In Thailand, the teaching/learning process had its origins in the temple, where the monks were the first teachers, carrying out their mission of spreading knowledge. So the first schools were temple schools, and the content of learning was determined largely according to the religious and moral values of society (Wells, 1975). Many schools today still attest to these beginnings since they bear the name of a *wat*, like Wat Rachathiwat School. Furthermore, many schools are situated within temple grounds, or on temple property.

Also, various factors which characterise the relationship between teacher and learner in Thailand even today, as well as certain pedagogical techniques or principles, can

be attributed to this tradition.

In particular, since the first teachers were monks, they were highly respected and revered by the lay community, being the highest and most prestigious members of society. This perhaps helps explain why even today, teachers in Thailand are well-respected members of the community, as born out by the terms of address *khru* and *acharn* in the Thai language, meaning "he who teaches disciples" or "he who spreads knowledge to his disciples" (Rachabanditsthan, 1982:171). Symbols of this social status and reverence are Teacher's Day, celebrated on 16 January each year in Thailand, and the *wai khru* ceremony celebrated on the first or second Thursday of the new school year in June.

In addition to this, it can be said that the roles of both teacher/monk and learner/layman were to a large extent determined by their social status, the teacher/monk being in possession of a body of knowledge, and the learner/layman being there to "receive" his teachings, so that the teacher is the "transmitter" or "giver" of knowledge, whilst the learner is the "receiver" of that knowledge.

Furthermore, in the Buddhist context, that knowledge was sacred, as the contents of the teachings involved memorising sacred religious texts related to the Buddha's teachings. Thus, the main pedagogical techniques used were those of memorisation and recitation. The teacher/monk dispensed a number of religious teachings, which his lay students had to learn by heart and be able to recite. At the time it was not considered important to understand the contents, as long as one could recite them by heart, and it was unheard of to ask questions about the contents.

In conclusion, teaching was entirely teacher-centred in the beginning and indeed content-centred. It is important to understand these origins, as these traditional pedagogical principles strongly influenced the teaching/learning techniques employed in both public and temple schools constructed during the reigns of King Rama V and King Rama VI. (Wyatt, 1984).

Despite a great number of changes in education and in educational policy, the traditional techniques of the lecture method and memorisation and rote learning persisted in many educational institutions until quite recently. However, today more than ever, educational needs are changing as society changes. As far as language-learning is concerned, the latest research has thrown light on the activity of the learner and consequently new pedagogical techniques are being introduced which demand of the teacher different and more diversified teaching techniques and of the learner the use of other types of mental capacities.

From A Teacher-Centred to A Learner-Centred Approach

During the late 1950's, innovation in language-teaching in the States was well-known and considered very prestigious. The audio-oral approach was popular, based on the principle of developing sub-conscious habits by getting language learners to do many structural exercises, especially in the language laboratory. This methodology grew out of linguistic theories such as Bloomfield's Distributional Structuralism, and psychological theories like Skinner's famous Behaviorist Theory. Innovation in language-teaching methodology resulted from the American National Defence Education Act of 1958, which was directly concerned with launching foreign-language teaching programmes in school contexts.

Later, in the late 1960's and 1970's teachers were introduced to audio-visual methodology, which originated in France (Coste, 1988). However, the political motivation for pedagogic innovation was quite different. During the Fifth Republic, the French wished to spread their language to foreign countries. In opposition to audio-oral methodology, audio-visualists attempted to expose the learner to situations enabling him to connect words with the subject and the

situation. What the audio-oral and audio-visual approaches had in common, though, was their emphasis on oral practice (as opposed to the old grammar-translation methodologies which preceded them), and speaking before grammatical explanation.

However, some dramatic changes of vital importance occurred in the 1970's, resulting in transition from the audio-oral and audio-visual methodologies to more learner-centred approaches like the notional-functional and communicative approaches.

Corder's research (1967) was the beginning of a shift away from the idea of language as a system and towards language as used by the learner. What is important to understand is how Corder enlarged the field of applied linguistics to include psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions:

"The application of linguistics to language-teaching is aimed at improving the latter in all respects, by organising teaching according to scientific discoveries about the nature of language and about the way the individual and society assimilate and use it."
(Corder, 1972:25)

Others developed the ideas of communicative competence (Hymes, 1971, Allen & Widdowson, 1974), interactional communicative discourse (Candlin, 1972), pragmatic function of discourse (Austin, 1970), defining language programmes according to notional terms and their linguistic functions (Wilkins, 1976), and learner autonomy (Chalon, 1970).

Of vital importance to the development of these ideas, was the work carried out by the Council of Europe, a consortium of European countries, with its headquarters in Strasbourg, France, set up to conduct research on and investigate different areas including education and language education. In 1971, a very important project called "Living Languages" was launched for which Wilkins developed the notional-functional approach. The first Threshold Levels were

for English language teaching. This project, which spanned 10 years, was also the occasion to reflect on language needs and on autonomous learning. It must be remembered that the work of the Council of Europe was really a multi-national synthesis of new, innovative ideas.

The salient, common characteristics of these diverse contributions were firstly, that they all converged regarding the pivotal role of the learner in the teaching-learning process. Secondly, although the innovations were initiated by linguists and applied linguists, they integrated the scientific ideas and findings of many other disciplines, including psychology, psycholinguistics, sociology, anthropology and ethnography.
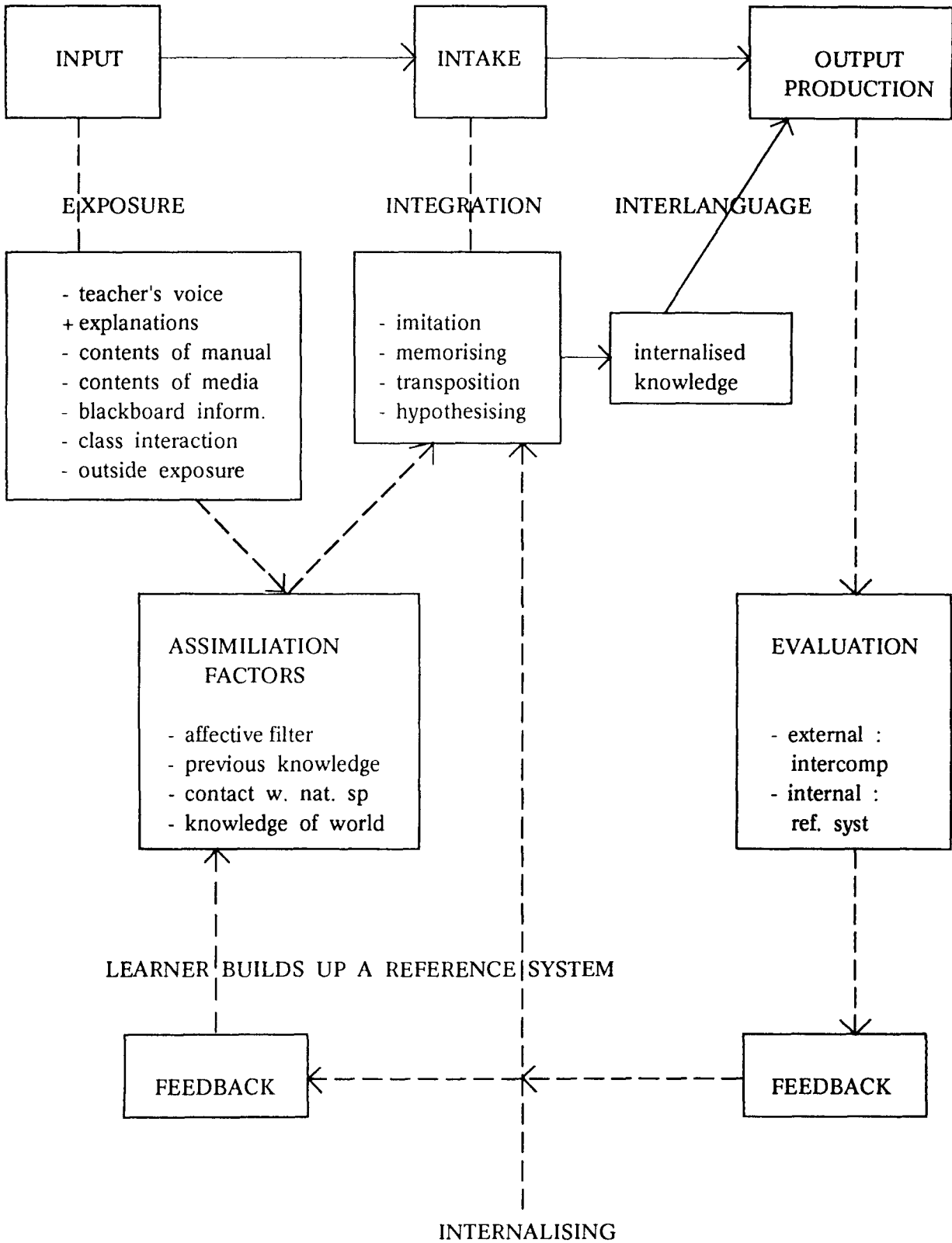
The whole notion of pedagogical innovation centers on the learner as a social actor in his social setting, and his use of language for specific purposes taking into account its full cultural and interactional significance, and in particular the learner's ways of perceiving, assimilating and integrating language.

How the Learner Learns : The Contribution of Psycholinguistics

In the field of psycho-linguistics, important research conducted in the early 1970's on the language learner and the way he learns revealed that in reality, the learner is not just an automat, repeating, memorising and retaining information like a parrot. He is much more than that. The language learner is in fact never passive. It was shown how, even when he is not actively participating in a lesson, or saying anything in class, there is tremendous activity going on in his brain. It functions a bit like a computer, constantly processing linguistic and non-linguistic information to which he is exposed. This activity, has been called metacognitive activity.

The learner does many things both consciously and sub-consciously (see Diagram).

4

LEARNING MODEL

INPUT → INTAKE → OUTPUT PRODUCTION

EXPOSURE   INTEGRATION   INTERLANGUAGE

- teacher's voice
+ explanations
- contents of manual
- contents of media
- blackboard inform.
- class interaction
- outside exposure

- imitation
- memorising
- transposition
- hypothesising

internalised knowledge

ASSIMILIATION FACTORS

- affective filter
- previous knowledge
- contact w. nat. sp
- knowledge of world

EVALUATION

- external :
  intercomp
- internal :
  ref. syst

LEARNER BUILDS UP A REFERENCE SYSTEM

FEEDBACK ← FEEDBACK

INTERNALISING

The learner is exposed to INPUT in the language classroom, for example the teacher's voice, interactions between students or between the teacher and other students, or the contents of a tape, film, or written material.

All the different types of language information would be nothing more than classroom noise, if there was no motivation to apprehend them or means to deal with them. So, some of this information, but not all, is filtered by a complex process and taken in. The type and quantity of this INTAKE will depend on the learner's learning habits, previous knowledge, general knowledge of the world, contact with native speakers and affective filter.

At the INTAKE stage, there is the mental processing of information in the brain, which includes imitation, memorising, transposition and hypothesising, in order to integrate it. It is consciously or subconsciously related to what is already known, compared to similar information in the mother tongue, or differences with the mother tongue, and organized for storage and use. All this language-related information contributes to the building up of a personalised reference system which is in a state of continual change and flux.

The final stage is that when asked to produce language, usually in the form of learner tasks in the classroom, that is either to speak or to write something, the learner draws on internalised knowledge to produce OUTPUT.

These discoveries, which seriously challenged Skinner's behavourist theories, revolutionised the conception of how a language learner learns, and forced applied linguists and pedagogues to rethink the whole notion of effective teaching techniques. The implications are profound in the sense that, for the decade of the 1980's and into the 1990's now, the focus is on the LEARNER, and pedagogic innovation takes as its starting point the learner himself.

The Learner-Centred Approach

The basic principle is that language teaching and learning is considered from the point of view of the LEARNER. The pedagogic aim is to take the motivations of the learner as the starting point and to help him develop his personal capacities and to reach his full potential as a human being. This is a very much broader aim than a language learner merely acquiring vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Taking this viewpoint it is necessary to identify the learner's personal needs at the outset (Porcher, 1980): for what purposes in the future the learner will need to use the foreign language and in which situations and contexts he will be required to function. Identifying the learner's needs includes taking into account ways of helping him develop his social and personal potential. It includes finding ways of helping him develop his own capacity to study and to become an autonomous learner.

A learner-centred approach takes into account the learner as an individual in his environment. This is very important, as it includes the needs of social groups and of the community in which the learner lives. His age, experience, intelligence, ways of learning and expectations with regard to the learning of a foreign language all have to be taken into account.

A learner-centred approach implies that language-learning is not limited to the acquisition of grammatical knowledge, but should be defined rather as the acquisition of tools that the learner can use appropriately to achieve an aim, enabling him to be able to react appropriately and effectively in any given communicative situation (van Ek, 1988). This implies that there is no conflict between the learner-centred approach and the communicative approach.

There are also implications for the teacher's role in a learner-centred approach. In a teacher-centred approach, the teacher is the partner who possesses a body of knowledge and his main role is to convey that knowledge and share it with his students. In a learner-centred approach, however, the

teacher's role is quite different. He is not so much the giver of knowledge as a guide, a sort of catalyst who helps the student to find and gain the knowledge himself. Instead of conveying or giving knowledge, his mission is to guide and support the student in his quest for knowledge and to help the learner become progressively independent. So the teacher's importance diminishes, until the learner is able to do without him completely.

The mission of the foreign language teacher also includes stimulating the learner's cultural enrichment and helping him to develop his understanding and acceptance of the diversity of humanity.

The Place for a Learner-Centred Approach in Thailand.

Thailand is at present in a phase of rapid economic development accompanied by important social changes. Amongst others, educators feel very concerned about the role of education having to keep pace with these changes and in particular being able to equip young people adequately for the new demands that will be placed on them in the future.

Some, like Somchai Wutthipreecha, Secretary General of the ministry's Primary Education Office, feel convinced that "Thailand is going to be a NIC in the next decade" (The Nation, September 2, 1990, C1). This means that the country will have to face new challenges including considerable internationalization as well as increased pressure regarding its economic position in the Southeast-Asian region. The nature of employment and job profiles are likely to be modified considerably as the country becomes progressively industrialized. In addition to existing bureaucratic positions in the civil service, Thailand will require qualified manpower to fit many new, specialised and industrial position, which will require development in education.

The national objectives of the Sixth Economic and Social Plan, which came into

effect in 1987 and ended in 1991 included the idea that the Thai nation should become autonomous, and that people should be capable of working individually and in groups. It seems logical, then, that educational objectives should follow this trend, contributing to the moral and intellectual development of the Thai people, in order to prepare society adequately to assume the changes on the horizon. Thailand needs well-qualified, efficient, modern economic agents capable of taking responsibilities and making decisions. These needs being stated, how can the education system best prepare students, and more specifically what can or should the role of foreign language teaching be in this context?

Although these questions are clearly too vast and complex to tackle within the scope of this paper, the principles of a learner-centred approach to foreign-language teaching, as outlined earlier, do seem to make a lot of sense given the specific nature of the modern Thai context. By starting from the learner himself and attempting to define his motivations for learning the language, as well as examining his future needs concerning the types of contexts and situations in which he is likely to need foreign language competency, teachers can better orientate their role, techniques, methods and classroom tasks to the enhancement of learner's individual development within the community. Furthermore, concentrating on developing his personal skills and stimulating his capacity to seek and find knowledge by himself and to be an autonomous learner appear to respond to certain aspirations of a fast developing nation.

Conclusions :

This paper is a mere starting point to help reflect on the notion of a learner-centred approach and to encourage examination of its principles in various teaching situations in Thailand in the hopes that it will enable Thai language-learners to come closer to their goals, both as individuals and as Thai citizens.

The learner-centred approach is likely

to have an inpact at various levels:

a) Language instructors may wish to think of ways of making their own courses more learner-centred.

b) For teacher-trainers, and this constitutes a vital dimension of the teaching activity, it is worth considering how to sensitise teacher trainees to the principles of a learner-centred approach (this may affect curricula - how to give them some theoretical information about this - and also the role of instructors who observe and guide teacher trainees during their teaching practices). In this respect, there is already a swing to a more learner-centred vision, or approach, in the sense that instructors of French and English are trying to help teacher trainees find ways of animating their language classes to encourage student-participation to a maximum, rather than simply transmitting knowledge. Also, the aim is to encourage trainees to work independently on a lesson, rather than following any method too rigidly, and encouraging them to gain confidence in themselves as teachers as much as possible.

c) Regarding language teaching curricula and objectives, both at the secondary and higher education levels, it is interesting to note that the seeds of a learner-centred approach are already perceptible in the Instructions of the Ministry of Education (1981). The teaching objectives for English and French are to develop communicative competence, to develop the four skills in order to be able to use them in everyday life, to improve the students capacities of reflexion, and to enhance their understanding of English-speaking cultures. Thus, the communicative, cultural and reflexive aims are clearly stated but classroom tasks and interaction must follow through.

One can be confident that the increased implementation of a learner-centred approach in Thai classrooms will not only ensure greater fulfilment of individual needs but also be of direct service to the expanding language needs of the nation.

The Author

Dr. Diana - Lee Simon is working at the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University as a lecturer - researcher in teaching English to future teachers of English. She completed her doctoral degree at the University of Grenoble III, France in the field of Language Sciences, specializing in linguistics and didactic in 1988. She did a field study on foreign language teaching, didactic and socio-cultural aspect in Thailand.

References

Allen, G.P.B & Widdowson H.G. (1974). Teaching the communicative use of English. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 12, I, 1-21.

Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Candlin, C. (1972). Acquiring communicative competence, *32nd Conference of Philologists*, Utrecht. Unpublished.

Chalon, J. (1970). Pour une pedagogie sauvage. In *Melanges pedagogiques* (pp. 1-7) Rancy: CRAPEL.

Corder, S.P. (1967). The significance of learners errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. No. 5.

Corder, S.P. (1972). La linguistique Appliquee-interpretations et pratiques diverses. *Bulletin CILA*, 16, 6-27.

Coste, D. (1975). La methodologie de l'enseignement des langues naturelle et seconde. *Etudes de Linguistique Appliquee*, 18, Paris, Didier Erudition.

Coste, D. (1988). Circulations methodologiques au debut des annees 1970. *Les Langues Modernes*, 1, 67-77.

Crahay, M. (1989). Comportement du maitre et participation des eleves. *Les Langues Modernes*, 1, 77-86.

Dabene, L. (1984). Pour une taxonomie des operations metacommunicatives en classe de langue etrangere. *Etudes de Linguistique Appliquee*, 55, 39-46.

Dabene, L. (1987). La recherche en didactique des langues. *Les Langues Modernes*, 1, 122-124.

Galisson, R. (1980). *D'hier a aujourd'hui la didactique generale des langues etrangeres*. Paris, CLE International.

Galisson, R. (1980). *Lignes de force du renouveau actuel en D.L.E.* Paris, CLE International.

Giglio Pier Paolo (Ed.) (1985) *Language and Social Context*. Great Britain: Penguin.

Girard, D. & Trim, J. (1988). *Rapport final du groupe de projet*. Conseil de l'Europe, Strasbourg.

Gumperz, & Dell, H. (1986). *Directions in sociolinguistics: the ethnography of communication*. Great Britain: Basil Blackweel.

Holec, H. (1986). On autonomy: some elementary concepts. *Discourse and learning*, (pp173-190). Hong Kong: Longman.

Hymes D. (1965). *Language in culture and society*. New York: Harper and Row.

Hymes, D. (1971). On Communicative competence. In Giglio Pier Palo (Ed.) *Language and social context*. Great Britain: Penguin.

Porcher, L. (1980). *Interrogations sue les besoins langagiers en contextes scolaires*. Conseil de l'Europe, Strasbourg.

Riche. (1989). *Ecoles et enseignement dans le Haut Moyen Age*. Paris: Picard.

Richeterich, R. (1985) *Besoins langagiers et objectifs d'apprentissage*. Paris: Hachette.

Simon, D.L. (1988). Enseignement-apprentissage d'une langue etrangere en milieu exoligue: aspects socio-culturels et didactiques. *Doctorat de Sciences du Langage*, dactylographie, Universite de Grenoble III.

Thailand: Ministry of Education. (1981). *Le cursus de l'enseignement du secondaire, cycle terminal*.

Thailand: Royal Institute: *Chabap Rachabanditsthan* (1982). Bangkok: Akson Charoen That.

Van Ek, J. A. (1988), *Objectifs de l'apprentissage des langues vivantes*, Vol. 1. Conseil de l'Europe, Strasbourg.

Wells, K. E. (1975). *Thai Buddhisme: its rites and activities*. Bangkok: Suriyan Publishers.

Widdowson, H. G. (1978). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilkins, D. (1976). *Notional syllabuses*. London: Oxford University Press.

Wyatt, D. K. (1984) *Thailand: A Short History*. Yale University Press.