


How do Albanian High-School Students and Teachers Perceive the Application of the Learner-Centered Approach?			Linguistics
			Keywords: learner-centered approach, high-order thinking skills, construction of learning, curiosity, creativity.
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Abstract			
<p>This article provides a brief synopsis of what the learner-centered approach is. It elaborates two of the principles of this approach and the way we suggest they may be applied by the teachers. This study aims to provide an answer to a major question which is widely discussed: “How encouraged are students to develop the high-order thinking skills during English classes and to what degree do the teaching techniques urge students’ curiosity and creativity.” Even though it has been widely written and discussed about a system of education which places the learner and his needs in the center, the reality in most Albanian schools is reflected differently from what it is expected to be. In order to provide an accurate answer to the raised question, the study has been conducted in three high-schools in Elbasan. The participants of this study are students and six English teachers employed in these high schools. The paper intends to unfold the teachers’ and the students’ point of view regarding the application of the learner-centered teaching techniques. From the findings derived from the used instruments, it was reached in the conclusion that the learner-centered approach is not properly applied in the classrooms regarding the fostering of the high-order thinking skills during English classes and the techniques which urge students’ curiosity and creativity.</p>			

Introduction

“It is our dream that students will ... experience their classrooms as invigorating, even inspiring environments – places they look forward to going to and places they hate to leave. It is our dream that they will come to know themselves as masters of various crafts... it is our dream that... they will come to love the process of learning itself... by making it their own.”

Paideia Schools

A new era has begun for our system of education: an era which delegates the centrality to the learner instead of the teacher. This shift of centrality began years ago when the negative outcomes of the teacher-centered approach started to be noticed. Consigning prominence to the teacher and introducing him/her as an authoritative figure that controlled every single aspect of the lesson and class, meant suppressing students’ needs, creativity but not only. Moreover, it failed to breed critical thinkers and productive individuals for the society. The 1980’s arouse the need to reshape the schooling system in order to adapt it to the revolutionary modifications of the social life. Psychologists and philosophers such as John Dewey, Piaget and Vygotski were among the first that laid down the foundations of a new teaching and learning approach where the centrality was to be held by the student. This is called the learner-centered approach and nowadays it has found a wide application in the education system of every country.¹

¹ Scott, Cynthia Luna. “The future of learning 3: What kind of pedagogies for the 21st century?”, Education research and foresight, UNESCO, 15 December 2015 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002431/243126e.pdf>

Numerous studies were conducted to demonstrate the impact the learner-centered approach has on the academic achievement of the students and the findings were surprising. Not only students performed better in different examinations and tasks, but they also became competent users of the acquired knowledge. This comes as a result of the principles established in the concept of this approach: it teaches students how to develop higher-order cognitive skills, it encourages students to develop social and collaborative skills by favoring the group-work, it motivates them to believe in their capacities by delegating them some control over the lesson and it involves students in the assessment of themselves. This article focuses on only two of the pillars of this approach: the development of high-order thinking skills and the techniques which urge students' curiosity and creativity.

Some years after it was firstly introduced in the developed countries, the concept of the learner-centered approach entered in the Albanian education system as well.² Its implementation has been somehow slow but continuous through the numerous reforms that the Ministry of Education and Science has made and is still making. Theoretically our country has succeeded in implementing it properly in its system of education. Practically, we need to raise the question whether the reality in our schools demonstrates a proper implementation of this approach in our classrooms.

The objectives of this study are to understand whether students are encouraged to develop the high-order thinking skills during English classes and to get information about the degree to which the learner-centered teaching techniques urge students' curiosity and creativity.

Methodology

It aims to provide a reflection of the reality in our classrooms without distorting the general truth. The settings where this study took place are three high schools in Elbasan. Their selection is made randomly and those schools are "Vasil Kamami", "Dhaskal Todri" and "Mahir Domi". After having selected the schools, there was made a request in DAR Elbasan to receive permission to conduct this study there. Having taken into consideration the nature of this study, it was considered appropriate to include both students and teachers in it. The method of sample selection is the stratified sampling. All the students of each school are divided into strata based on their grade: 10th, 11th and 12th. Each grade is represented by one class which is chosen randomly. The total number of students who participate in this study by filling out the questionnaires is 150. Another group of participants are the six English teachers who are employed in the three previously mentioned institutions. Having determined the research questions and the answers that this study intends to provide, both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used. This choice is considered suitable for this study and effective enough to provide the researcher with all the necessary data to answer the raised research questions.

² "National Education Research", Donor appraisal and endorsement report
< [file:///C:/Users/Compaq/Downloads/2013-07-FTI-Appraisal-Albania_processed%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Compaq/Downloads/2013-07-FTI-Appraisal-Albania_processed%20(1).pdf)>

Literature review

The beginnings and the development of a student-centered approach in the Albanian system of education

Albania has had a slow progress in all fields of life as a result of the numerous invasions and isolating systems of governance such as was the communism era. This slow progress has been noticed even in education, which is considered to be the foundation of a successful country. Thus, if we compare the system of education in countries such as Finland, Canada, the US and the one in Albania, the results would be discouraging. If in developed countries educationalists and philosophers were working for the reformation of the education system by applying the student-centered approach around 1970s, Albania had strongly embraced an education system based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology.³

While other countries were trying to improve the quality of teaching and learning by considering the needs of the students, Albania was suppressed by the communist regime and its despotism to control every single aspect of people's life. Education at that time had only two aims: the first was to reduce the illiteracy in the country and the second was to help the regime control the Albanians' life through what was taught. While other countries were struggling to improve the academic texts and to delegate more freedom and prominence to students, the communist regime in Albania was struggling to prohibit all the foreign literature and every book that offered a new perspective to people that was different from the Marxist-Leninist one. A teaching and learning approach where the student would be in the center of the process was unimaginable and absurd at that time.

The year 1990 marked a new era for Albania. The communist regime collapsed and a lot of things were expected to change. Anyway this change in every field of life came very slowly as the country had been isolated for 45 years and an outdated ideology had been deeply rooted in people's minds. Even in 1996 the aim of education was only to fulfill the needs for production of a closed economy and the ideological needs of an isolated country.⁴ A such thing fatally restricted the education system to offer the youngsters the necessary skills to succeed in the new world in which they entered unexpectedly. Even though the communist dictatorship ended and Albania became a democratic country, it was very difficult to establish democracy in people's minds and lives. The system of education underwent little change and the teacher still exerted the same authority as before. On the other hand, students' needs were poorly taken into consideration, their active participation continued to be discouraged and the assessment continued to be made based on the students' ability to mechanically reproduce the received information. Studies made by different researchers have shown that the reality in the 1990's schools, especially in the rural areas

³ Jeong, Hae Yoo. "History of education in communist countries", WHKMLA, June 2009.

<Albania had strongly embraced an education system based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology>

⁴ Nora Dudwick, Helen Shahriari, "Arsimi ne Shqiperi: Qendrim dhe Shpresa ne Ndryshim" Banka Boterore Washington D.C. (2000):2
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/952741468003297678/pdf/720350WP0ALBANOC0Arsimi0Ne0Shqiperi.pdf>

was very different from what was expected. Nora Dudwick and Helen Shahriari have conducted a study in many schools in Albania, both in rural and urban areas to learn more about the way the system of education functioned. They concluded that teachers in the rural schools not only neglected to consider students' needs and to guide them towards the exploration of the information, but they also neglected to do their job professionally. The teachers disdained students who lived in the village and discouraged them to learn.⁵ In those conditions, it was very difficult to talk about a student-centered teaching and learning.

It was only after the 2000 that the ministry of education undertook powerful reforms to improve the quality of education in Albania. New roles and functions were assigned to the students and teachers in the class. Students were given more prominence in this process and their needs regarding learning were taken into consideration. The class itself was designed to be converted in a space where discussions, reflections and teamwork took place.

In order to make this shift from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one, a change needed to be made even in the school texts. Until 2004 the students learnt with the old texts which promoted the teacher-centered approach and it is worth to be mentioned that there was only one text for each subject in one grade. In the 2006-2007 academic year, the Ministry of Education and Science (MASH) changed those books and offered more than one possible text for each subject in a specific grade.⁶ The new texts were designed to promote the learner-centered teaching and they were improved year by year. The system of education could not be reformed if the change in the ideology was not reflected in the texts that students studied.

Another important reform in the education system was the integration of technology in schools. Since students are no longer passive receivers of information but they have to search for that information with the help of the teacher, they needed to have access to various technological devices and the internet. In 2009, the Ministry of Education, financed by SOROS finished the project "E-learning", which was aimed to equip all schools with computers and to provide internet access to all students.⁷

In "Strategjia Kombetare per Arsimin Parauniversitar 2009-2013" among other aims, there were settled the intentions to integrate TIK in different subjects and to increase the digital content and the multimedia materials in school curricula.⁸ A lot of reforms followed one after the other concerning the improvement of the education quality and the integration of technology. Nowadays there is being implemented a pilot project of equipping some classes with smart boards and tablets.

⁵ ibid

⁶ Kozeta Noti, "Kurrikula dhe aplikimi ne tekstet shkollore sipas modeleve bashkekohore", Tirane 2013
<http://www.doktoratura.unitir.edu.al/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Doktoratura-Kozeta-Noti-Fakulteti-i-Shkencave-Sociale-Departamenti-Psikologji-Pedagogjise.pdf>

⁷ "Integrimi I teknologjise se informacionit dhe komunikimit ne edukimin ne Shqiperi", Tirane 2013
<http://www.altri.al/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Broshure-E-learning.pdf>

⁸ ibid

The new curriculum has delegated a special prominence to the curricular projects. The system of education is still being changed and reformed in order to fulfill the needs of a continuously changing society.

The learner-centered approach and its pillars: The learner-centered approach encourages students to develop higher order thinking skills

This approach, in contrast to the traditional one, does not value or encourage the memorization of the facts and lessons word by word as this is estimated as a worthless method that produces nothing more than machines and incompetent individuals to apply their knowledge in real life. As an approach that places the student in the center of the education process, it encourages the development of higher order thinking skills. It urges students to develop their critical thinking. Gregory Bassham, a professor of philosophy, writes that “critical thinking is the general term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze and evaluate arguments and truth claims; to discover and overcome personal preconceptions and biases; to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions; and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do.”⁹

Michael Scriven and Richard Paul define critical thinking as an intellectual process of conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing and evaluating the information gathered from observations, experience, reflection, reasoning and communication, as a guide for conviction and action.¹⁰ Formulated in another way, students are encouraged to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it. For many educationalists, to think in a critical way means to use “high-order” cognitive skills, referring the taxonomy of Benjamin Blum.¹¹

Now that the concept of critical thinking has been explained, it is pertinent to discuss about the way the learner-centered approach urges students to think critically. This is made possible by the implementation of the taxonomy of Bloom. It was firstly created in 1956 as a framework for categorizing the goals of the education and it was revised in 2001 by a group of curriculum theorists and cognitive psychologists.¹² Bloom’s taxonomy, considered as a “multi-tiered model of classifying thinking according to six cognitive levels of complexity, has served as a stairway, leading many teachers to encourage their students to climb to a higher level of thought”.¹³ The basic level of Bloom’s taxonomy is remembering, which requires students to retrieve, recognize and recall information from the long-term memory.¹⁴ Remembering is followed by understanding, which deals with constructing meaning by interpreting, classifying, exemplifying, explaining and

⁹ Gregory Bassham, et al., *Critical Thinking, A Student’s Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011) 1

¹⁰ Bardhyl Musai, *Metodologji e mesimdhenies*, Tirane, Albgraf, 2003: 113

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Patricia Armstrong, “Bloom Taxonomy” *Center for Teaching*
<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

¹³ Mary Forehand, “Bloom’s Taxonomy- Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching and technology”
<http://www.d41.org/cms/lib010/IL01904672/Centricity/Domain/422/BloomsTaxonomy.pdf>

¹⁴ Bardhyl Musai, *Metodologji e mesimdhenies*, Tirane, Albgraf, 2003 : 53

comparing the information.¹⁵ The third level of Bloom's taxonomy is the application. Students have to implement their knowledge to solve a problem. The fourth level is the analysis which leads students to break the material in its constituent parts and to determine how these parts relate to one another.¹⁶ The fifth level is the synthesis, which is the process of combining the constituent parts in order to create a whole one.¹⁷ The last level of Bloom's taxonomy is the evaluation. It is the judgment of the usefulness or the value of different materials and methods for some specific purposes.¹⁸

As it can be seen, the last three levels encourage students to go beyond the memorization, understanding and application of the information. The student is required to use high-order cognitive skills by analyzing the information he has received, by evaluating it and also by creating and generating something new from the knowledge he or she possesses.

Bloom's taxonomy has served the purpose of helping teachers to formulate learning objectives. In 1956, Bloom wrote in his book that:

*"A teacher, in classifying the goals of a teaching unit, may find that all fall within the taxonomy category of recalling or remembering knowledge. Looking at the taxonomy categories may suggest (that the teacher) could include some goals dealing with the application of this knowledge and with the analysis of the situations of the situations in which the knowledge is used."*¹⁹

Nancy E. Adams, the Associate Director of the Penn State University states that this taxonomy is very useful in two ways. Firstly, it helps the teachers to formulate learning objectives at the *behavioral* level in order to realize what the learners can do as a result of the instructions they receive and secondly, it helps the teachers to formulate learning objectives that lead the students to deeper learning and the transfer of skills and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts and tasks.²⁰

Findings

Data from the students' questionnaire

Regarding the frequency of the activities that awake our curiosity and make the lesson interesting, there were received these data:

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Lorin W. Anderson, "Objectives, evaluation and the improvement of education", ELSEVIER, 2005

http://www.tcd.ie/teaching-learning/academic-development/assets/pdf/Anderson_2005_Bloom%27s_Taxonomy.pdf

²⁰ Nancy E. Adams, "Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives", *JMLA*, 2015

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4511057/>

Frequency of occurrence	Number of students	The percentage of students
Never	12	8%
Rarely	50	33.3%
Often	61	40.7%
Always	27	18 %

Table 1. Data about how interesting students find the lesson

From the received answers, it is reached in the conclusion that the majority of students: (61 of them or 40.7%) claim to often find the lesson interesting. This is followed by the number of students who consider their lesson is rarely interesting. This response is crossed by 50 students or 33.3% of them. After that, 27 students (18%) have responded that they always find the lesson interesting because different activities that urge their curiosity and make them interested in it take place. The least chosen response is the frequency never, which has been selected only by 12 students who make only 8% of the selected sample.

Asked whether the teacher urges them to think critically about the lesson they are introduced to, it is reached in the conclusion that 20 students (13.4%) assert that they always receive an urge from their teacher to think critically about what they are learning, 70 students (46.6%) claim to be often encouraged to think in a critical way, 46 students (30.7%) respond they are rarely encouraged not to take the information for granted but to critically think about it and 14 students (9.3%) are inclined to respond negatively by admitting that they are never asked to think critically about the lesson. These responses are reflected in the charter presented above.

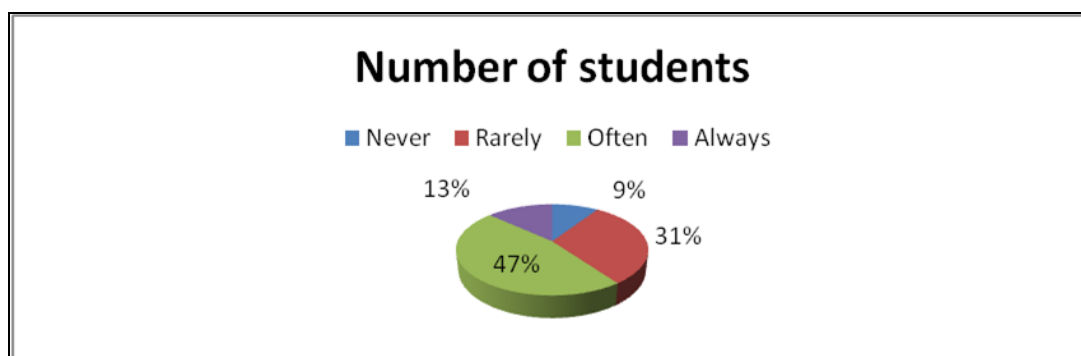
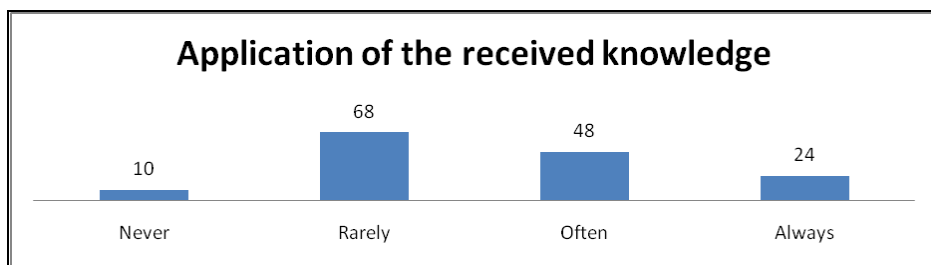


Chart 1. How frequently are students encouraged to think critically?

Based on the analysis of the responses provided by the students regarding the application of the new information in concrete situations, it is reached in the conclusion that 68 students (45.3%) claim that they are rarely asked to apply the received information in the concrete situations and they are instead required only to memorize and reproduce the previously received information. 48 students (32%) have responded that this occurs often, 24 students (16%) state that this is required always and 10 students (6.7%) have responded that they are never required to apply the received information in concrete situations in order to learn through application.



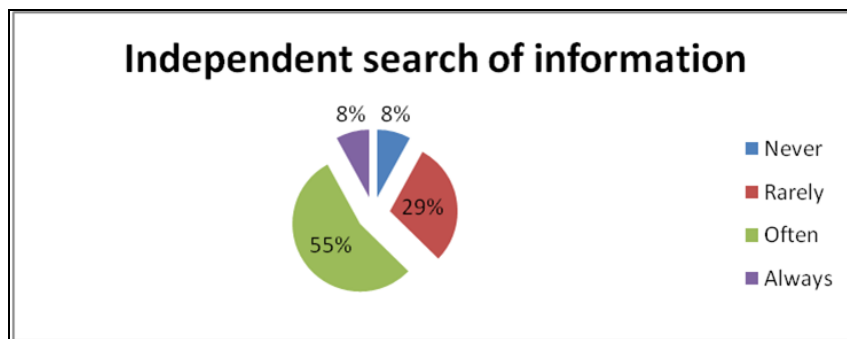
Graph 1. The number of students who responded about the frequency the teacher asks them to apply the received knowledge in concrete situations.

Asked whether the teacher assigns them tasks which boost their ability to think and to reflect, it is noticed that 53 students (35.5%) have admitted that their teacher always assigns them tasks which boost their ability to think and reflect, 79 students (52.6%) have responded that this occurred often, 14 students (9.3%) have affirmed that this happens rarely and only 4 students (2.6%) have provided a negative answer.

Frequency of occurrence	Number of students	Percentage of students
Never	4	2.6 %
Rarely	14	9.3 %
Often	79	52.6 %
Always	53	35.5 %

Table 2. Data about the frequency students are assigned tasks that boost their ability to think and reflect.

Another question in the questionnaire was related to the frequency the teacher asks students to search independently about extra information related to the lesson.



Graph 2. Data about the frequency students are required to search independently about information related to the lesson.

This question in the questionnaire has received a negative answer by 12 students (8%) who claim that they are never required to do that. 44 students (29%) have responded that they are rarely required to search independently for information related to the lesson, 82 students (55%) admit

they are often required to do that and only 12 students (8%) have affirmed that they are always asked to search for information independently.

Data provided from the teachers' interview

The interview was designed to be answered by the teachers employed in these three high schools. The questions intended to reveal the teachers' perspective of applying the learner-centered approach in their classrooms and they were made in accordance to the student's questionnaire. The reason behind this is to offer an analogy between the students' answers and the teachers' answers. The number of teachers interviewed was 6. The results of their answers are as presented below.

Teachers were asked whether they considered the information absorbed if the students were able to memorize and to reproduce the presented material but they were not able to apply it and neither to analyze or reflect about it. Four of the interviewed teachers responded that they considered the lesson learnt because if the student cannot reproduce what he or she has learnt, then he or she cannot do the other processes. Two other teachers said that the information is not absorbed if students do not know how to apply it. This is unproductive according to these teachers.

Moreover, all the six teachers responded that they always make the lesson interesting by including activities, role-play, quizzes, etc. All the interviewed teachers responded that they started the lesson with activities that require low-order thinking skills such as memorization and reproduction but they always require students to use even high-order thinking skills such as reflection, synthesis and a critical analysis of what they have learnt.

Discussion of findings

One important issue related to the application of the learner-centered approach in our classrooms is the use of activities that stimulate students' curiosity and make the lesson interesting rather than boring. Students learn better when they are interested in what is being explained and when they find the lesson pleasant and entertaining. Even though this is how it should happen, students have provided answers which prove that things do not always go this way. 61 students have responded that such activities that make the lesson interesting take place often but on the other hand there is a considerable number of students, 50 to be precise, who claim that the lesson in their classroom is rarely made pleasant through different activities and therefore, they exhibit a low interest and curiosity.

The learner-centered approach urges the critical thinking and the other high-order thinking processes as they are considered to be crucial in the academic preparation of students. Students cannot be considered to have learnt something if they just memorize the information for a later reproduction but they have to reflect about it, they have to think critically, to analyze the information, to apply it in a concrete situation and also to evaluate it. From the answers provided by the students, it is understood that the teachers require students to use high-order thinking skills about what they learn but this answer is given mostly by students who have a high academic level.

On the other hand students who have an intermediate and low academic level have responded that they were rarely or never encouraged to think critically, to analyze, synthesize or evaluate the information presented to them. Apparently, teachers consider these high-order thinking skills to be assigned only to good students, less to them who have a lower academic level and not at all to students who have a low academic level.

Referring to the teachers' answers, it can be said that most of them consider the lesson learnt if the students are able to reproduce it but not to analyze and to apply it. They added that not all the students are able to reflect about the received information or to apply it and such a thing is reflected in their academic level as well. This is not in accordance with the principles of the learner-centered approach. Memorization and reproduction are outdated learning methods and they are considered inefficient as well because they do not prepare and train students to use their knowledge in concrete situations. Probably not all the students may be able to reflect about the received information but they cannot be considered to have learnt it if they are unable to apply it.

Conclusions

Teachers say that they stimulate students' curiosity and interest by using interesting and entertaining activities. Such a thing is not reported by students, the majority of whom, report that the teacher rarely makes the lesson interesting by developing different activities. Moreover, the teachers claim that they encourage students to think critically about what they are learning. On the other hand, students' responses indicate that the teacher encourages only those students who have a high academic level to think critically and to reflect about what they are learning, excluding the other ones whose academic performance is not very good.

Based on the students' answers it can be concluded that the application of the learner-centered approach regarding two of its principles is not in an optimal level and there is place for further improvement. Our classrooms are far from what is being expected to be a learner-centered one.