

The Relationship between Learner-centered Instruction and Student Engagement

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Abstract

Educational reform in the United States since the 1980s has evolved over the years to develop learner-centered instruction. Research indicated learner-centered instruction has a positive effect on student learning outcomes, such as student engagement, student motivation, and academic performance. However, the evidence is relatively limited in the Chinese higher education context. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between learner-centered instruction and student engagement in Chinese higher education. The researchers collected data of perceived level of learner-centered instruction (i. e., cognitive and metacognitive, motivational, and social domain) and student engagement (i. e., behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domain) from 201 full-time undergraduate students (male=65, female=136) from Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU). The results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between learner-centered instruction and student engagement, $r = .798$, for example, results indicated the positive relationship between the cognitive and metacognitive domain and behavioral engagement ($r = .632$), and the social domain and emotional engagement ($r = .661$). The current study provides extra evidence contributing to the application of learner-centered instruction in Chinese higher education.

Keywords: Chinese higher education; educational reform; learner-centered instruction; student engagement

1. Introduction

The traditional educational pattern, teacher-centered instruction, is usually related to rigid lecture and somehow less learners' autonomy, which restricts the student class engagement to some extent. However, student engagement has been considered as an important element that will influence the learning process of high-level education (Hu, 2011), and support successful academic achievement as one of the main conditions (Gregory et al., 2014). Therefore, the essence of the educational reform occurred in 1980s involves a shift in the focus of teaching and learning from the teacher to the student, with the teacher taking on more of a facilitator role.

Prior studies have found that students' view on the use of learner-centered syllabus are more positive, and they have a higher level of engagement in the classroom (Richmond et al., 2016). Also, learner-centered instruction contributed to students' sustained attention and higher levels of effort (Gilboy et al., 2015). Moreover, when they sense the teacher cares about them as more than just students, for example, respecting their needs and thoughts, making instructions that are more fit in their needs, taking care of them, etc., students tend to participate more and to be actively involved in the classroom discussions (Meece, 2003; Richmond et al., 2016). Besides, when teachers provide more autonomy in the classroom and support students' critical thinking during learning process, students are more likely to make the connection between the new knowledge and previous knowledge base (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

Therefore, plenty of studies has already proven the significance of learner-centered instruction and its relevance to positive learning process and performance, especially in western countries. However, there is limited evidence contributing to learner-centered instruction in China higher education nowadays, though more and more people are advocating related research. One of the possible reasons is that learner-centered instructional practices are a little bit hard to apply to the large classroom capacity. However, WKU provides an East-meets-West teaching environment and relatively small classroom capacity. Therefore, the researchers intended to explore the relationship between learner-centered instruction and student engagement in this context.

1.1 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs)

So far, there are 14 principles developed by the APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (BEA, 1997), called the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs), which are divided into four main domains: Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors, Motivational and Affective Factors, Developmental and Social Factors, Individual Differences. Firstly, LCPs are applied to learner-centered teaching and learning; besides, it applies to all kinds of learners no matter ages, teachers or students, in or outside school settings (McCombs, 2001). In addition, those four different aspects list several special principles from different perspectives. Besides, BEA (1997) stressed that these principles were organized and general, and they applied to all learners, including students, teachers,

community service providers, etc. However, considering the broad nature of the principles, this article will only concentrate on the Cognitive and Metacognitive domain, Motivational domain Social domain.

2. Methods

The participants include 201 full-time undergraduate students at WKU (male= 61, female=136; freshman= 96, sophomore=54, junior=35, senior=16). The researchers pooled items from widely used survey of learner-centered instruction and student engagement and translated and revised based on Chinese cultural background. Besides, the items are reviewed and evaluated by a panel of experts in educational psychology. The reliability of perceived learner-centered instruction subscales (cognitive and metacognitive, motivational, and social domain) and student engagement subscales (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domain) ranged from 0. 848 to 0. 904. Then, the researchers developed an online questionnaire using the website named wjx.cn and shared the link through social media, including QQ and WeChat, inviting target participants to access and respond voluntarily. All participants were asked to report the experiences of having ENG AS A SECOND LANG (ESL) course, which is a compulsory preparatory course in WKU. In this way, the researchers collected data of the level of student engagement and perceived level of learner-centered instruction in various sessions of ESL course. The student reported based on the 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.

3. Result

3.1 Preliminary analyses and descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics (i. e. mean, standard deviation, and skewness) among three domains in learner-centered instruction (LCI) (i. e. cognitive and metacognitive domain (CMD), motivational domain (MD), and social domain (SD)), overall level of LCI, three domains in student engagement (SE) (i.e. behavioral engagement (BE), emotional engagement (EE), and cognitive engagement (CE)), and overall level of SE. Results indicated that the level of learner-centered instruction in WKU courses is around medium, mean=3.48, and generally, students display a high level of classroom engagement, mean=3.66 (1. 00- 1. 50: strongly disagree; 1.51-2.50: disagree; 2.51-3.50: neutral; 3.51-4.50: agree; 4.51-5.00: strongly agree). Gender and grade differences on student engagement are also examined. The results suggested there was no significant difference in student engagement between gender, while significant differences in student engagement across different grade levels were found. Freshmen were significantly more engaged in class than junior and senior students. The potential reason could be that freshmen are just coming out of the rigid high school classroom and are highly curious about the college classroom setting.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of all domains and variables

	CMD	MD	SD	BE	EE	CE	LCI	SE
Mean	3.42	3.50	3.52	3.71	3.59	3.69	3.48	3.66
SD	.95	.93	.92	.96	.91	.89	.84	.85
Skewness	-.66	-.73	-.93	-1.01	-.84	-.91	-.82	-1.07

3.2 Correlation

Table 2 shows the correlation of learner-centered instruction and student engagement. Results indicated a significant positive correlation between them ($r = .798$), which is consistent with the previous research (Emery et al., 2020; Verbeeten, 2001; Yilmaz, 2017). All of the domains of student engagement are significantly related to learner-centered instruction. Specifically, the cognitive and metacognitive domain was significantly positively correlated with behavioral engagement, $r = .632$. When teachers focus more on framing knowledge and guiding students to think critically, students show a higher level of motivation to complete tasks, are more willing to ask questions, and are more engaged in group work. A significant positive relationship was also shown between social domain and emotional engagement, $r = .661$, which indicates that when the teacher recognizes students' efforts and encourages them, it fosters interest in the subject and a sense of belonging to the class.

Table 2: Correlation of learner-centered instruction and student engagement

	BE	EE	CE	SE
CMD	.632**	.643**	.625**	.685**
MD	.727**	.760**	.730**	.799**
SD	.588**	.661**	.614**	.671**
LCI	.721**	.764**	.729**	.798**

4. Conclusion

The results provide extra evidence for the finding of previous studies that higher level of standard learner-centered instruction support contributes to more active student engagement. Learner-centered instruction grants students more ownership and initiative and motivates them to be more engaged in multiple dimensions, which is consistent across cultures. These results provide new insights and implications into which strategies can better support student engagement in the context of learner-centered instruction. Based on this, students can improve performance and learning motivation later on.

Considering that related studies have not been adequately discussed in the Chinese higher education context, this study uses WKU as a sample to explore further. The primary reason for this is the specificity of the WKU teaching system. WKU is not a traditional Chinese university, and at the same time has a good blend of Western culture. This means that it not only has an advanced teaching philosophy and approach, but also has diverse class sizes. Thus, the researchers can explore how learner-centered instruction is

implemented in such context and further inform the later practice and provide the discussion of the implications of learn-centered instruction.

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