

Moving Towards Adopting More Active Teaching Approaches to Teach Research Methodology

Miss Nacéra BOUDERSA
University of Constantine 01

Introduction

In the present article, we seek to explore the teaching practices that would help students learn and understand the research methodology subject well and teachers to have better teaching results on the basis of their students' performance. We claim that if teachers aspire to improve their teaching and succeed not only in the transmission of knowledge and information to their students but also to make sure these students have mastered the basic notions and concepts and applied them in real life contexts; teachers should move beyond mere exposition and delivery of information to actual practices.

Courses in the research methodology subject in English are often taught in more theoretical forms as lectures. Exercises might be included to reinforce EFL students learning of the main aspects in the subject. Too often, EFL Algerian undergraduate students find themselves confronted with a set of abstract aspects and research methodology principles such as the construction of hypotheses, formulating research questions, summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting other authors' views and so forth. Teachers who have addressed the subject of research methodology might feel a lack of interest on the part of the majority of students vis-à-vis research methodology courses because these students perceive the subject as a difficult one and feel unease in understanding its major concepts.

The worst case for teachers in teaching research methodology courses might be a situation whereby a teacher gives lectures about abstract concepts with lot of details of research strategies, techniques and so on. In many cases, such kind of teaching practices might result in a class of frustrated students who, at the end of each course, may feel left out and neglected to a great extent. That is why if asked about the subject, some students might reply with weak and unenthusiastic way and describe the course as a boring one and a difficult one.

In a good attempt to raise the EFL students' interest in the subject, teachers may resort to other means that, according to them, might bring some beneficial and remarkable change in the classroom. In addition to lectures, teachers may, for instance, give students tasks of further readings, exercises, assignments and research proposals to work on, but despite the fact that these latter can bring a change, they may not

strongly meet what is actually expected from the course, the teacher and students, and above all the curriculum or the course objectives.

In the present article, we maintain that the teaching of the research methodology subject to Algerian EFL undergraduate students should be based on active learning and real life experience in teaching and learning. Moreover, focus of teaching should be placed on the student and the process of their learning, a fact that has been always emphasized in the student-centered approach to teaching. Opportunities to learn, question, reflect and experience real life tasks should be promoted and encouraged in the research methodology classroom. Different teaching methods and techniques are available at the disposal of the EFL teacher to help students learn better and apply what they learn successfully. By involving students in active learning tasks and projects inside and outside the classroom, this will give them better chances to ask questions, think, reflect, struggle and find solutions by themselves. This is of great importance to them, especially if they are going to conduct their own future research.

1. Current Situation in Teaching Research Methodology

The subject of research methodology is considered as a compulsory subject in undergraduate curriculum in the LMD system in the Algerian universities. This subject is seen as being very important with the idea behind teaching it in order to prepare EFL Algerian students to undertake research in the future as a condition for their graduation. The importance of this subject is usually mixed with a great fear and frustration on the part of students who perceive it as a challenging and difficult subject for them. The present paper serves as a guiding for teachers and students alike whereby it is recommended that teachers should use more student-centered, including active and experiential learning, methods and techniques in order to improve the students' understanding of the subject and their performance.

EFL students do usually confront serious problems in the learning of certain English subjects because of their theoretical, technical or abstract, nature. Research methodology is one of these subjects that Algerian EFL students seem to struggle within their learning. This comes from the fact that they often get low marks in the research methodology subject. EFL students may find it very difficult for them to try to link what they learn from theory to other real life contexts and situations (Carty, 2007 :98).

There is no consent among teachers on how research methodology should be taught and which approach to adopt. This is clearly expressed by Booth and Harrington (2003 : 24) who state that, "there is little agreement as the appropriate way to teach research methods or indeed its role and place in the curriculum. The teaching approach that we claim for in the present article is grounded in our experience as students first then teachers. We believe that when students take ownership in what they learn (research methodology in this case), they will develop an interest in the subject. To use Carty (2007 : 100), "Most importantly, students engage in real research study, or 'learning by doing', an approach recommended by most researchers in the field.

Nowadays, the teaching of the research methodology subject in English has become a central one in higher education especially in undergraduate programs. Teachers have come to recognize the fact that there is much ignorance on how teaching research methodology in the social sciences should be. Several questions about what to teach and how to teach this important subject have always always been raised and the usefulness of the methods questioned. Garner *et al.* (2009:01) describe the situation whereby students find themselves facing serious troubles in conducting their own research with very weak knowledge, if no knowledge at all, about research methodology and research methods. They state that,

As far as methodology was concerned, earlier generations of research students ... were generally flying in the dark. They were either told to follow a specified line of enquiry (or left to pick up methodological skills as and when they could) in the process of doing research. Those who were fortunate had supervisors who initiated them into the research process through a sort of apprenticeship. Otherwise, they had to rely on what they could glean from books on methodology, research reports and ad hoc methodological seminars. The notion that research methods could or should be a subject in the curriculum (let alone a compulsory subject) was largely unknown. (Garner *et al.* (2009:01)

Pressures to improve teaching and understanding among students have led to more stressing of the importance of teaching research methodology with a sound training of students in how to do research with regard to research methods or research methodology. Since students in the undergraduate and graduate levels in our Algerian universities are required to conduct their own research projects or dissertations before graduation and moving from one level to another, it is always stressed that they should possess a sound and deep knowledge about research methods, techniques and strategies. More important of all is the fact that this important subject should be taught and emphasized in earlier years of study at university (ibid.2).

Calls and concerns to help students learn and apply successfully the theoretical knowledge they get from courses have always been spelt out in all English subjects, but especially with subjects that are abstract in nature and need more practice to deepen and reinforce understanding. Research methodology is one of these abstract subjects taught in the undergraduate program. The following quote is a description of what students might experience and feel in the research methodology subject or when conducting research :

The students readily acknowledged a lack of awareness of research methodology and project [...] skills. The resulting gaps in knowledge and skills meant that they did not know about, or understand, the main concept for data collection and analysis before starting [their][...] project. What was astonishing to all involved was the lack of commitment to an activity which would help bridge some of those gaps, before the work on their compulsory dissertation began. (Ashwin and Hirst, 2010 :32)

Because of its great importance, nowadays knowledge of research methodology is a vital tool to enable people to do their research projects effectively and successfully. Given the central importance it has in higher education, it is interesting for teachers to take a look at the way they teach or used to teach research methodology in their classrooms. The major focus of the research methodology curriculum in undergraduate programs is to prepare undergraduate students to conduct future research.

Generally, the teaching of research methodology at all levels is complicated. What makes the situation worse is the different perceptions EFL students have about the importance of doing research. Some students may consider the research methodology courses or subject as unnecessary and imposed on them. Their view is based on what they receive in courses in this subject because, to them, they reflect a knowledge and theory transmission and not research in a more practical sense. One of the central factors that lead to better understanding and raising interest of students to learn research methodology and develop a devotion to it is the teacher's attitudes towards the teaching of this important subject.

With regard to discontent among teachers about the students' ability to write good research proposals, research papers and so forth, Khumalo and Ndaba (2005 :248) states that,

We come to realise that the work of students hardly meets the standard of writing research papers. There is no clarity in the statement of the problem, research objectives and hypotheses, research design, sampling design, data collection procedures, data analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendations.

It is usually spelt out that the teaching of research methodology is a difficult task. The reason for that is the fact that the teaching methods usually emphasize lecturing more than anything else. This theory oriented or teacher-centered teaching tradition provides students with mere knowledge about the available research, instead of involving them in real tasks and doing more practical learning.

2. Student-Centered Teaching Approach

A good way to improve teaching and learning is to adopt more student-centered approaches to teaching the research methodology subject to EFL undergraduate students. Special focus will be on the introduction of certain interactive learning activities in the curriculum. This change in the teaching practices comes as a response to the challenges that teachers experience with students with the intention of making research methodology curriculum interesting, relevant and more practical in nature (Barraket:65).

Learner-centered teaching is not confined to the use of one single method of teaching. It emphasizes a variety of methods whereby the role of the teacher shifts from information giver to learning facilitator. In the learner-centered teaching, focus is placed on what students are learning, how they are learning, and how they can use that learning.

Being student-centered implies a focus on student needs. It is an orientation that gives rise to the idea of education as a product, with the student as the customer and the role of the faculty as one of serving and satisfying the customer. Faculty resist the student-as-customer metaphor for some good reasons. When the product is education, the customer cannot always be right, there is no money-back guarantee, and tuition dollars do not "buy" the desired grades (Weimer, 2008: xvi).

Moreover, in the learner-centered teaching, focus is placed squarely on learning. That is to say, attention is given to what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying what has been learnt, and how current learning positions the student for future learning. The student is the main focus of teaching and constitutes an important part of the equation in the learning process.

The aim behind supporting adopting the learner-centered teaching in the research methodology subject in English is to promote students' learning. Weimer (2008: xvi) points out that the expression "learning-centered" has been suggested to be used instead of "learner-centered", but she (ibid.) prefers to keep the former to keep focus on the learner, on the student. By using the expression "learner-centered", we keep emphasis fixed on the direct object of our teaching which is the student, "We do not want more and better learning at some abstract level; we need it specifically and concretely for the students we face in class (ibid.: xvi)."

According to Blumberg (2009: 18), five teaching practices have to be changed to achieve learner-centered teaching.

2.1. The Function of Content

The function of the teaching content in the learner-centered teaching gives the student a strong knowledge basis, the ability to apply what has been learnt, and the ability to learn more independently. Students need an understanding of why they need to learn the content, and they need to be actively engaged in their learning.

2.2. The Role of the Instructor

The role of the teacher in the learner-centered teaching is to help students to learn. Teachers should not just deliver information as it has been the case in the teacher-centered approach to teaching; instead, they should also create an environment for learning to take place. The teaching methods that teachers use should also be appropriate for the learning goals and the instructional objectives. To use Khumalo and Ndaba's (2005: 249) words, "It should be the responsibility of the lecturers to balance the interests of students with the usefulness of the method in selecting the research method to be taught."

2.3.

The

Responsibility for Learning

The responsibility for learning in the learner-centered teaching shifts from the teacher to the student. The teacher helps students to take responsibility for their own learning by creating situations that motivate them to learn. The teacher should also help students to acquire knowledge and skills that they will need in the future. When students assume responsibility for their own learning, they become self-directed learners who are aware of their own abilities to learn.

2.4.

The

Purpose and Processes of Assessment

The purpose of assessment in the learner-centered teaching shifts from merely assigning grades at the end of each semester, to providing constructive feedback in order to assist students in improving their learning. Learner-centered teaching integrates assessment with feedback as a part of the learning process.

2.5.

The

Balance of Power

In the learner-centered teaching, the balance of power shifts also so that the teacher shares some decisions about the course with the students (Blumberg, 2009: 18).

The support for the student-centered approach to teaching research methodology is informed by other very interesting and closely related concepts such as **active learning** and **experiential learning**.

3. Experiential Learning and the Teaching of Research Methodology

Learning by experience is considered as one of the most fundamental means of learning. In simple words, experiential learning reflects the ability to **think** and to **reflect** individually or collectively. To use Beard and Wilson's (2002:16) words,

Experiential learning is, in essence, the underpinning process to all forms of learning since it represents the transformation of most new and significant experiences and incorporates them within a broader conceptual framework.

Stein (2011:20) also emphasizes the importance of experiential learning by stating that,

a uniquely valuable source for learning—especially in the realm of human behaviour on the individual and group level—lies in the experience of everyday life and the conceptualization and reflection on it. It implies that academic or book learning—on its own—cannot be a substitution for learning from experience and may only play a supplementary role by recording or otherwise elaborating on some of the learning phenomena derived from experience.

In the same line of thought, Silberman (2007: 8) states that experiential learning refers to,

(a) the involvement of learners in concrete activities that enable them to experience what they are learning about and (b) the opportunity to reflect on those activities. Experiential learning can be based on both real work/life experiences (e.g., working on a current project) and structured experiences that stimulate or approximate real work/life.

Put simply, a good way to teach something is to act it out. Descriptions and theoretical explanation of some concepts are useful, but they are not always greatly understood by students, especially if they are later on asked to apply what they have covered in the course.

To use Silberman's (2007:8) words again, "acquiring skills require more than monkey see, monkey do. Experiential activities are important in order to succeed in building a level of awareness and to be able to apply what has been learnt in other different, but related, contexts. There are many forms of experiential learning such as : on-the-job assignments, field experience, action learning projects, and so forth.

Other different techniques are available at the disposal of teachers to teach research methodology in a more practical way including: **problem-based learning, group work, doing projects** and so forth. It is our believe that teaching practices and the curriculum should be re-oriented toward student-centered teaching because it may lead to better learning, understanding and positive performance on the part of students (Barraket :64).

4. Active Learning and the Teaching of Research Methodology

Students can learn better by doing. The active involvement of students in the process of learning is also the key to success. Teaching the knowledge and skills in the research methodology subject using real life situations will be useful in providing EFL students with good learning experience. Learning by doing is a good way to understand, retain knowledge and apply it later on in different contexts.

Unsuccessful teaching of research methodology is claimed to have been basically lecturer-centered or teacher-centered. As it has been pointed out earlier in this article, focus has been on delivering information at the expense of placing much focus on the student and the process of learning. Given these facts, teachers' teaching orientations have been directed towards adopting more student-centered approaches to teaching any English subject, especially research methodology in our case. Decisions to adopt the student-centered approach to teaching is in order to increase interaction among students through group discussions, doing collective/individual research projects and so forth. Khumalo and Ndaba's (2005 :248) state that,

The use of practical real life examples that are relevant to the local situation where students have some expertise and experience is recommended. In research application rather than sheer exposition by lecturers and absorption is what makes effective learning. By giving them an assessed research proposal

students have the opportunity to apply concepts, methods and techniques learnt.

Such kind of learning that involves students in direct and real life tasks allows them to start asking important questions, think, and reflect in a process of exploration and discovery. In this case, they will develop an ability to appreciate the process of reasoning. Hence, though getting them down to work in the research proposal task, for instance, teachers provide the students with an excellent opportunity to gauge their grasp of theoretical concepts (ibid.).

According to Wolters et al. (2000: 21), active learning is

a form of learning in which the learner uses opportunities to decide about aspects of the learning process... it refers to the extent to which the learner is challenged to use his or her mental abilities while learning. This active learning on the one hand has to do with decisions about learning and on the other hand making an active use of thinking.

One of the major points that should be given due concern is the fact that after each course, the teacher should make a follow up by assigning some practical exercises. This will serve as a demonstration of students' understanding of the concepts covered in the course.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to make teachers aware of the difficulties they may encounter in teaching research methodology. Experience-based or active-based teaching adopting the student centered approach can help students learn concepts better and apply what they learn in real life situations especially in conducting future personal research projects. The best way to help students improve their research skills is through involvement in practice.

Bibliography

- Ashwin, M. and Hirst, A. (2010). Spreading the Load-a Programme Team Approach to Delivering Methodology. In J. Esteves (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 9th European Conference on Research Methods in Business and Management Studies*. Madrid: Academic Conferences Limited.
- Barraket, J.(no date). 'Teaching Research Method Using a Student-Centred Approach? Critical Reflections on Practice.'
http://jutlp.uow.edu.au/2005_v02_i02/barraket004.html (accessed 25 September 2013).
- Beard, C.M., and Wilson, J.P. (2002). *The Power of Experiential Learning: A Handbook for Trainers*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Booth, C. and Harrington, J. (2003). 'Research Methods Modules and Undergraduate Business Research: An Investigation.' *The International Journal of Management Education* 3(3) pp 19-31.
- Blumberg, P. (2009). *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching: A Practical Guide for Faculty*. USA: John Wisely & Sons.
- Carty, R. (2007). 'Teaching Research Methods: a Pragmatic Approach.' *Investigations in University Teaching and Learning*. Vol. 4 (2) pp 98-105.
- Garner, M., Wagner, C. and Kawulich, B. (2009). *Teaching Research Methods in the Social Sciences*. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Khumalo, R. and Ndaba, J. (2005). Teaching Business Research Methods to First Time Undergraduate Researchers: Experiences and Problems. In A. Brown (Ed.): *Proceedings of the 4th European Conference on Research Methods in Business*. Madrid: Academic Conferences Limited.
- Silberman, M.L. (2007). *The Handbook of Experiential Learning*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Stein, M. (2011). Theories of Experiential Learning and the Unconscious. In L.J. Gould and L.F. Stapley, M. Stein (Ed.), *Experiential Learning in Organizations: Applications of the Taviscock Group*. London: Karnac Books.
- Weimer, M. (2008). *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. San Francisco: John Wisely & Sons.
- Wolters, B.V., Simons, R.J. and Volet, S. (2000). Active Learning: Self-Directed Learning and Independent Work. In R.J. Simons, J.V. Linden, and T. Duff (Ed.), *New Learning*. Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers.