

## CHAPTER TWO

### UNDERSTANDING LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

In this chapter, I shall clarify some theoretical notions about learner-centeredness, which can serve as analytical tools for achieving a greater understanding of Chinese EFL teachers' classroom practice informed by learner-centered principles.

#### 2.1 The Definitions of Learner-centeredness

The concept of learner-centeredness has been invoked with increasing frequency in recent years. Nunan (1991) defines the learner-centered approach as follows:

A learner-centered approach is based on a belief that learners will bring to the learning situation different beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language and language learning and that these beliefs and attitudes need to be taken into consideration in the selection of content and learning experiences. The approach contrasts with the 'doctor-knows-best' approach which, while it might acknowledge that learners have different preferences and beliefs, discounts these on the grounds that the teacher is the expert and that the learners' views are

irrelevant. (p. 178)

In the learner-centered approach, the learners are seen as being the center of the educational process. For the teaching institution and the teacher, this means that instructional programs should be centered around learners' needs and that learners themselves should exercise their own autonomous mechanisms in the choice of learning objectives, content and methods as well as in determining the means used to assess their performance. This notion of learner-centeredness reflects one philosophical shift that has taken root, and that is having a profound effect on all aspects of second/foreign language teaching and learning. This is a shift from the transmission model of education, which sees the function of an educational system as the transmission of a received body of facts, values, and procedures for conceptualizing and adding to that body of knowledge, to an experiential model, which sees the function of an educational system as being to create the conditions whereby learners might recreate their own knowledge and skills (Nunan, 2000).

The concept of learner-centeredness has been controversial, mainly because it is susceptible to multiple interpretations. Some teachers react negatively to the concept because they feel that implicit in the notion is a devaluing of their own professional roles. Others believe that it involves handing over to the learner duties and responsibilities that belong to the teacher. I believe that both of the criticisms are misguided. The central

understanding that emerges from a holistic look at this notion is that for educational systems to serve the needs of every learner, it is essential that key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed are made relevant to the learner.

## 2.2 Theoretical Bases for Learner-centeredness

The support for learner-centered learning comes from many quarters and is not a new concept. Its roots date back to the progressive education movement of the early 1900s; that movement based some of its ideas on learners having more control over the learning process (Pulliam & Van Patten, 1999). Carl Rogers' work in the late 1960s supported the idea of giving learners more control over their learning environment (Rogers, 1969). Other philosophical and academic positions such as Lewin's social psychology (1935, 1936), Piaget's model of developmental psychology (1972), and Kelley's cognitive theory of education (1955) all played a part in the conceptualization of the notion of learner-centeredness.

More recently, the learning-centered concept is also supported by a study begun in the early 1990s by the American Psychological Association (APA). The APA issued a report in 1993 that identified 12 learner-centered principles. In 1997, the APA revised the report, identifying 14 learner-centered psychological principles. The 14 principles were sub-divided into the following four groups: (1) cognitive and metacognitive

factors; (2) motivational and affective factors; (3) developmental and social factors; and (4) individual differences (see Figure 1).

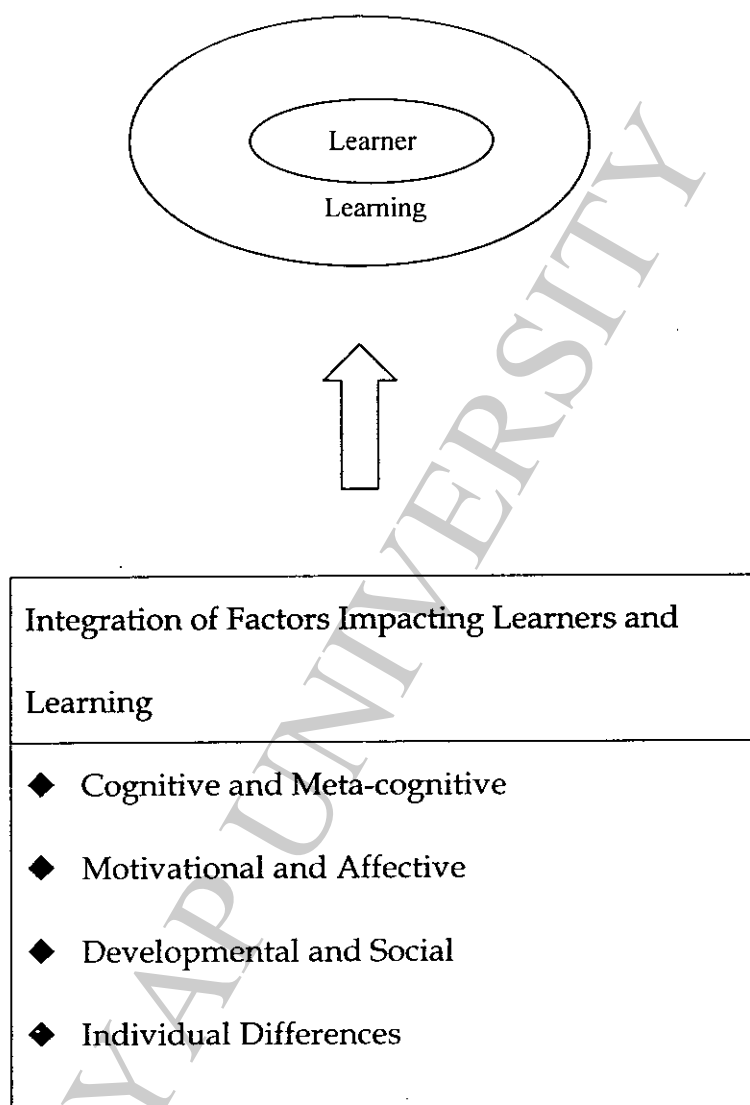


Figure 1 Learner-centered Model: A Holistic Perspective (McCombs & Whisler, 1997)

As shown in Figure 1, the learner-centered model pertains to the learner and the learning process. It is intended to deal holistically with learners in the context of real-world learning situations. The principles that underlie this model focus on psychological factors that are primarily internal to and under

the control of the learner. They also attempt to acknowledge external environment or contextual factors that interact with these internal factors. Therefore, this model logically leads to an integration of the internal learner factors and the external learning factors, and so promotes a view that puts the learner focus in the forefront.

Out of the notion that learners are at the center of the learning process, and that learning is a process of self-discovery, grew experiential learning. In experiential learning, the learner's immediate personal experiences are taken as the point of departure for deciding how to organize the learning process. The most comprehensively formulated model of experiential learning is that of Kolb (1984). Kolb suggests that, through experiential learning, the learner moves from the known to the new through a process of making sense of some immediate experience, and then going beyond the immediate experience through a process of transformation. In relation to language education, the most articulate examination of experiential learning is provided by Kohonen (1992), who argues that the experiential model offers, "potential for a learning atmosphere of shared partnership, a common purpose, and a joint management of learning" (p. 19). He goes on to suggest that in classrooms infused with the vision promised by experiential learning, behavior is a joint responsibility of the whole class, and that the teacher is only one member within that class. He provides the following contrasts between traditional and experiential model of education along 10 key

dimensions (see Table 1).

Table 1 Traditional and Experiential Educational Models Compared (Nunan, (Ed.). 1992, p.31)

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Traditional Model: Behaviorism</u>	<u>Experiential Model: Constructivism</u>
1. View of learning	Transmission of knowledge	Transformation of knowledge
2. Power relation	Emphasis on teacher's authority	Teacher as 'learner among learners'
3. Teacher's role	Providing mainly frontal instruction; professionalism as individual autonomy	Facilitating learning (largely in small groups); collaborative professionalism
4. Learner's role	Relatively passive recipient of information; mainly individual work	Active participation, largely in collaborative small groups
5. View of knowledge	Presented as 'certain'; application problem-solving	Construction of personal knowledge; identification of problems
6. View of curriculum	Static; hierarchical grading of subject matter, predefined content and product	Dynamic; looser organization of subject matter, including open parts and integration
7. Learning experiences	Knowledge of facts, concepts and skills; focus on content and product	Emphasis on process; learning skills, self-inquiry, social and communication skills
8. Control of process	Mainly teacher-structured learning	Emphasis on learner; self-directed learning
9. Motivation	Mainly extrinsic	Mainly intrinsic
10. Evaluation	Product-oriented; achievement testing; criterion-referencing (and norm-referencing)	Process-oriented; reflection on process, self-assessment; criterion-referencing

### 2.3 The Perspectives of Learner-centeredness

Like many widely used terms, the concept of learner-centeredness probably means rather different things to different people (Nunan & Brindley 1986). According to Tudor (1993), discussions of learner-centeredness are often complicated by the fact that the term is used to express at least the following four related, but nonetheless distinct perspectives on language teaching:

1. An approach to activity organization. In this use of the term, learner-centeredness relates to a way of organizing classroom activities. The basic idea is that learning activities will be more relevant if it is the students, as opposed to the teacher, who decide on the conceptual and linguistic content of these activities.
2. The humanistic perspective. The humanistic movement stresses the importance of qualities such as understanding, personal assumption of responsibility, and self-realization (Stevick, 1990). From this perspective, language learning is seen as an activity which involve students as complex human beings, not 'simply' as language learners. Language teaching should, therefore, exploit students' affective and intellectual resources as fully as possible, and be linked into their continuing experience of life.
3. Practical necessity. In recent years, there has been considerable interest in learner autonomy (Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Holec, 1979) and

self-direction (Dickinson, 1987) in language teaching. In part at least, this arises from the need to cater for language teaching in situations where a traditional classroom-based approach is not feasible. The teaching profession has looked for new approaches to teaching which allow students to attain their goals with less teacher support. This has involved a re-examination of what students can contribute to their learning of a new language, and experimentation with teaching methods designed to exploit students' autonomous learning potential.

4. The curriculum design perspective. Writers such as Brindley (1984) and Nunan (1988) have suggested that curriculum design can be seen as a negotiative process between teachers and students. In this view, decisions regarding the content and form of teaching can be made at classroom level via consultation between teachers and learners.

Synthesizing these different uses of the term learner-centeredness, and the perspectives on language teaching they reflect, a number of basic ideas underling most discussions of learner-centeredness can be identified. These include: (1) Goal-setting can be made more relevant if it is a negotiative process between teachers and students, in which students can contribute to the process on the basis of their own experiences; (2) Learning is more effective if methodology and study mode are geared to motivate students affectively and intellectually; (3) Students get more out of learning activities if they have a say in deciding their content and in creating their own learning



tasks and language data; and (4) Students will, in a general sense, benefit from learning if they feel involved in monitoring their study programme and in assessing their own progress.

In what follows, this set of tenets will form the primary analytical framework for the presentation and analysis of data.

#### 2.4 Curriculum Process and Learner-centeredness

As mentioned above, the notion of learner-centeredness can be viewed from the perspective of curriculum design, given the fact that any teaching curriculum is designed to answer three interrelated questions: What is to be learned? How is the learning to be undertaken and achieved? To what extent is the former appropriate and the latter effective? (Breen & Candlin, cited in Hall & Hewings, 2001). For the purpose of the present study, a retrospective evaluation of the curriculum processes serves as a starting point for elucidating the roles assumed by the learner-centered approach for learners and teachers, and the responsibilities these roles bring with them.

##### 2.4.1 Learner Roles in a Traditional Curriculum

The traditional curriculum, which is mostly inspired by Tyler's best known work, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Tyler, 1949), places language teaching within the framework of the relationship between (1) some specified purposes, (2) the content which is selected and organized

to attain the purposes, and (3) the evaluation procedures which assess the appropriateness of the initial purposes. The procedures of this model are shown in Figure 2.

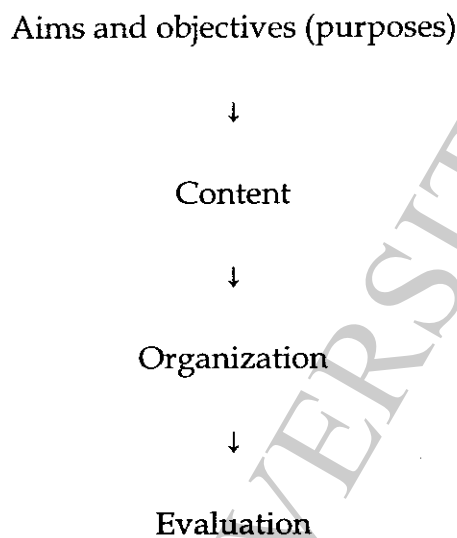


Figure 2 Traditional Curriculum Design Model

This so called 'ends-means' model concentrates on the products rather than the processes of learning, and since such curriculum is introduced and managed in a way which is prescribed by the teacher or institution, the learner's role in this framework is, therefore, merely that of a means to determine the educational purposes.

#### 2.4.2 Learner Roles in a Learner-centered Curriculum

Borrowing from a framework of humanistic psychology, Clark (1985) suggests a 'curriculum renewal'. The curriculum model emphasizes the creation of syllabuses in which "educational, subject-specific and

learner-orientated objectives (content and methodology) are reconciled”, the creation of resources to provide learning experiences for the learners, the writing of principles and guidelines to assist teachers to tailor their classroom practices to the requirement of their learners, and “the elaboration of an assessment scheme to monitor and measure pupil progress” (p.3).

To the proponents of this curriculum model, the central role of the learners in the entire learning process is obvious. Nunan (1988) makes a clearer statement about the key difference between learner-centered and traditional curriculum development, which is that “in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught” (p.2). From this perspective of curriculum development, each element in the curriculum process will involve the learner, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2 Learner Roles in a Learner-centered Curriculum

Curriculum stage	Roles of learner
Planning	Learners are consulted on what they want to learn and how they want to go about learning. An extensive process of needs analysis facilitates this process. Learners are involved in setting, monitoring, and modifying the goals and objectives of the programs being designed for them.
Implementation	Learners' language skills develop through the learners actively using and reflecting on the language inside and outside the classroom. They are also involved in modifying and creating their own learning tasks and language data.
Assessment and evaluation	Learners monitor and assess their own progress. They are also actively involved in the evaluation and modification of teaching and learning during the course and after it has been completed.

(Adapted from Nunan & Lamb, 2001)

### 2.4.3 Teacher Roles in a Learner-centered Curriculum

It is generally accepted that a learner-centered approach to teaching alters the role played by the learners. It is less often pointed out, however, that learner-centered teaching implies a parallel change in the teacher's role.

A traditional view of the teacher is of someone, in Tudor's (1993) terms, the knower, who possesses knowledge and dispenses knowledge. This role also denotes a figure of authority who decides on what should be learned and how this should be best learned. Another important role in traditional language teaching is that of an organizer, the one who "sets up and steers

learning activities in the right direction, motivates and encourages students, and provides authoritative feedback on students' performance" (ibid., 24).

Within a learner-centered approach to teaching, these two main roles still remain. Besides, teachers are assumed to play a further role of learning counselor, whose responsibilities are to gear language teaching to students' intentions and resources. This has a number of implications for the teacher, who will need to (1) learn about the students and their interests, abilities and learning styles, (2) help students clarify their intentions and develop their resources, and (3) reflect upon the effectiveness of students' participation and channel it in a pedagogically useful direction. It is obvious that the roles of teachers in a learner-centered approach are versatile. Teachers may be seen to have more responsibilities and perform more functions than ever before.

### 2.5 The Challenges to Learner-centeredness

The implication of the learner-centered approach to language teaching, that attention which has been lacking in earlier approaches and methods is being given to the rights and integrity of the student, certainly fits principles of the current trends within the profession which take into account the expectations, experiences, learning preferences that students bring to the classroom. Nevertheless, the vision suggested in the learner-centered definition, the various principles, and the premises are challenged by various

writers in education as being “admirable and theoretically sound, but idealistic” (Rallis,1995, p.24). Usher and Edwards (1994), following the critical sociology of Foucault, even argue that learner-centeredness education might be having the opposite effects. The challenges posed to the notion of learner-centeredness are briefly discussed below.

### 2.5.1 Learner-centeredness vs. Learning-centeredness

Table 2, which sets out the roles of the learner in relation to curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation, represents an ideal learning situation in which learners are able to make sound decisions about what to learn and how to learn from the early stage in the learning process. Actually in the real learning contexts it is usually well into a course before learners are in a position to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Therefore, the learners need to be systematically taught the skills needed to implement a learner-centered approach to pedagogy. Nunan and Lamb (2001) thus argue that in order to make the program “learning centered”, “learning process goals” (p.29) should be included in language programs in addition to “language content goals”(p.30). By systematically educating learners about what it means to be a learner, learners reach a point where they are able to make informed decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. In this sense, learning-centeredness is designed to lead to learner-centeredness.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) interpret what they call “learning-centeredness” in terms of the situational factors of language learning. They argue that the term ‘learner-centered’ is misleading because it simply implies the learner is the sole focus of the learning process. In effect, the wider social context of what happens in the classroom should be given equal attention.

As well, Holliday (1994) argues that the learner-centered approach assumes a stereotypical “learner” and does not do enough to find ways of finding out about the vast array of “learners” in real situations with whom it really has to deal. He suggests that in order to help methodologies relate to the realities of classrooms, one needs to know not about “learners” but about “learners” in real classroom settings, where there may be many other influences on language learning from the society both outside and within the classroom.

Holliday further claims that a “disciplined learning-centeredness”, which acknowledges the social context of education, gives power to teachers with regard to decisions made in the light of what strategy will bring learning about.

### 2.5.2 Professional Constructed Learner-centeredness

In his recent work of investigating cultural continuity in curriculum innovation, Holliday (2001) argues for the “technologised professional

discourse of learner-centeredness" (p. 170). According to him, the increased need for accountability within the ELT profession has brought about the measurement of student progress in terms of the achievement of discrete learning objectives, and the outcome is a bureaucratisation of learner-centeredness, which means the student is seen in terms of a set of pre-defined, measurable competencies and skills, and he or she is thus reduced to a product of measurable educational technology. In this sense, learner-centeredness becomes what Fairclough (1995, cited in Holliday, 2001) calls a "technologised discourse" which appears ideologically neutral but in fact represents the bureaucratic and ideological needs, not of the "learner", but of a particular professional group. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

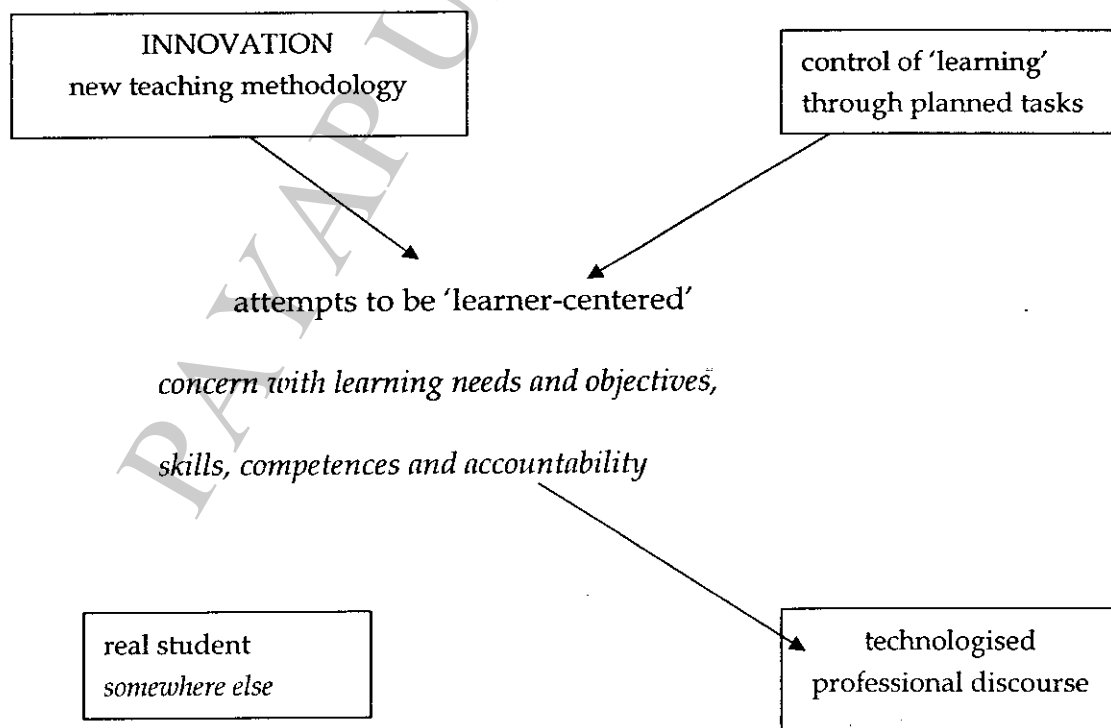


Figure 3 Professionally Constructed Image of 'the Learner' (Holliday, 2001, p. 171)



### 2.5.3 Theory into Practice

Transferring the theory of learner-centeredness into actual practice is the challenge faced by classroom teachers and educational administrators. Such transfer begins with the practitioners having a clear understanding of the various underpinnings of the concept - the principles that form its foundation. As Rallis (1995) puts it, the change requires "a shifting of perspective, the adoption of a new set of assumptions about schooling" (p.225). People hold beliefs and assumptions about schooling that shape their expectation and drive their judgments. These expectations often run counter to what a learner-centered school delivers.

The literature on the management of change (e.g. Fullan, 1991; Markee, 1997) indicates a number of different factors that may affect the implementation or non-implementation of innovations. I shall briefly discuss here two interrelated factors that contribute to the discrepancy between prescribed theory and classroom practice, namely teacher beliefs and contextual factors, which seem particularly relevant to the case study discussed in this thesis.

#### 2.5.3.1 Teacher Beliefs

Drawing on work in general education the language teaching profession has begun to recognize that teachers, apart from the methods and materials they may use, are central to improving English language teaching (Freeman,

1991; Johnson, 1992; Prabhu, 1990; Richards & Nunan, 1990). The previous lack of emphasis on the teacher runs the risk of forgetting the fact that teachers as the main decision makers at the classroom level decide, shape, and modify the curriculum based on their classroom reality (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992).

As Freeman and Johnson (1998) claim, "teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills; they are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in their classroom" (p. 404). Therefore, the introduction of a new approach might be in competition with teachers' well-established theories of language teaching and learning which are the product of previous teaching and learning experiences, prejudices, and beliefs. If the innovation is incompatible with teachers' existing beliefs and attitudes, resistance to change is likely to occur (Waugh & Punch, 1987). Within ELT, for example, there are a number of recent reviews of largely unsuccessful attempts to implement learner-centered communicative curricula amongst teachers whose background and experience tends towards more traditional teacher-centered methods. In various forms this scenario has been documented in China (Hui, 1997; Penner, 1995), Egypt (Holliday, 1994), Greece (Karavas-Doukas, 1995), and Oman (Harrison, 1996).

### 2.5.3.2 Contextual Factors

Change is a much more complex phenomenon in that teachers, the so-called recipients of change, act according to the values and attitudes prevalent in a given society or culture, and that accepting change may require changes to deep-seated beliefs and behavior. If teachers fail to develop the knowledge of their students, their schools, and their communities and gain understanding and support from them, change is less likely to occur.

Taking the social contexts of teaching in school as of primary concern and conducting a more critical socio-political analysis of language teaching environment at the macrolevel, Crookes (1997) argued that second/foreign language teachers often perform their teaching tasks under conditions of far less autonomy than other professions as regards curriculum, materials, and school structure. He claimed that "the way teachers teach is influenced by the effects of the social structures in which they are embedded, which create them, and which they in turn create" (p. 73). Thus, he called for an adequate administrative support for language teachers' professional development. In addition, Vélez-Rendón (2002) emphasized the need for conducting research on contextual factors influencing second language teachers' ongoing professional development, such as school culture, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, parents, and students. These studies have pointed up the significance of contextual factors, which affect teachers' classroom

teaching as well as their professional development.

## 2.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for a fuller understanding of how learner-centeredness is defined and its implications for language learning and teaching, particularly in the area of curriculum development. Having taken its root in many quarters in general education, the vision suggested in the learner-centered definition implies that from a curriculum development perspective, the choice of learning objective, content, and methods as well as the means used to assess learners' performance should be made relevant to the learner. The learner, therefore, is actively involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught, which is in contrast to the learner as being a means to determine the educational purposes in a traditional curriculum.

Although the various principles of learner-centeredness have been invoked with increasing attention in recent years, there have been criticisms concerning the learning context in which learning take place, which are often ignored by the proponents of the learner-centered approach. Another challenge posed to the notion of learner-centeredness is about transferring the theory into practice. Among the various factors that may affect the implementation or non-implementation of curriculum innovations (the

learner-centered approach in this case), two interrelated factors, namely teacher beliefs and contextual factors contribute significantly to the discrepancy between prescribed theory and classroom practice.

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