

Original Paper

Exploring the Use of Learner-Centered Instruction with English Language Learners in Social Studies Classrooms

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Abstract

Despite English Language Learner (ELL) supplemental instruction on Saturdays and evenings and professional development for teachers, learner-centered instructional strategies in social studies are currently ineffective in meeting the learning needs of the ELL population in an urban school in the northeastern United States. The instructional approaches being used to deliver curriculum have a marginal effect on learning for ELL students, and the local school board supports the importance of exploring this problem. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the learner-centered instructional practices used at the study site and how teachers are using Weimer's framework to engage ELLs in social studies. Guided by Weimer's learner-centered instruction theory, the research questions focused on exploring how teachers use Weimer's learner-centered instructional strategies and how teachers plan their instruction for ELLs and social studies using Weimer's framework. As a case study, this qualitative research involved gathering data during 1 academic year through observations and interviews of 10 teacher participants. Research data collected through observations and interviews were coded into an Excel document to assign and filter codes. A 3-day professional development opportunity and monthly follow-up sessions were the results of the analysis of data collected from interviews and classroom observations of 10 ELL social studies teachers in Grades 9-12. The results of this study may lead to positive social change if social studies teachers modify their learner-centered instructional approaches to increase students' motivation and satisfaction in learning.

Keywords

social studies, instructional learning, learner-centered, classroom instruction, English Language Learners, social studies classrooms.

1. Introduction

Despite the availability of English Language Learner (ELL) supplemental instruction on Saturdays and evenings and the provision of professional development for teachers, learner-centered instructional strategies in social studies are ineffective in meeting the learning needs of the ELL population at a northeastern U.S. high school (referred to in this study with the pseudonym *Northeastern School*). Although the school offered specially designed courses to 197 ELL students in social studies, only 68 out of 105 students passed the NYS Global History Regents exam. School administrators had concerns about teachers' use of learner-centered methods in their instruction in ELL social studies classrooms for Grades 9 through 12 (Assistant Superintendent AB, personal communication, November 22, 2016; Assistant Principal AB, personal communication, November 22, 2016). The district advisor who supervised and consulted on teachers' lesson plans expressed concern about the lack of Learner-Centered Instruction (LCI) used by teachers when teaching social studies. Moreover, ELL students in social studies scored lower on state-mandated social studies tests compared to native-born students; 61% of ELL students at Northeastern School did not demonstrate proficiency in social studies as measured by the school's 2014-2015 New York State Regents Exam. Northeastern School's Quality Guide for 2014-2015 indicated that 64% of ELL students scored below the passing grade and did not meet the target.

Weimer's (2013) learner-centered model emphasizes student participation in classroom discussions, exploration, and critical thinking, as well as the use of problem-solving activities. Rodriguez-Valls and Ponce (2013) asserted that using LCI can increase the possibility of meeting the academic needs of ELLs in social studies. Skilled learner-centered instructors know how to create a learning environment where students explore, experience, and build knowledge instead of just memorizing content. Weimer's learner-centered model has been found to promote students' engagement in classroom discussions, problem solving, and critical thinking activities. This study addressed a gap in practice at Northeastern School, where it was unknown how LCI was being used by teachers and whether LCI was producing the intended results.

Two important research questions were developed to address this gap in practice:

RQ1: How are teachers using Weimer's learner-centered instructional strategies to instruct and engage ELL students in their social studies classes at Northeastern School?

RQ2: How do teachers plan their instruction for ELLs in social studies classes using Weimer's learner-centered approach?

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and document the learner-center instructional practices used at Northeastern School and to explore how teachers were using Weimer's (2002) framework to engage ELLs in social studies. In the following sections, the research design and

approach are discussed, the selection of qualitative inquiry and case study, and justifies the research design are addressed.

2.1.1 Sampling

Using purposeful sampling, participants for this study included high school social studies teachers who taught five to 10 ELL students each. Receiving permission from the school principal to access the names and email addresses, 15 potential participants were contacted through email and solicited their participation in the study. Yin (2017) noted that with a case study design, a sample size of four to 12 people is typically used when the researcher seeks in-depth insight into a phenomenon.

Participants in this study were ELL social studies teachers. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this research study because the researcher knowingly selected participants who met three criteria: (a) Social studies teacher, (b) Grade 9-12 teacher, and (c) ELL teacher. Gaining a deep understanding of how social studies teachers were using LCI was important.

2.1.2 Data Collection

The data were collected through open-ended semistructured interviews. Teachers' data reflection tools were also available as these completed reflection documents were used by interviewees as part of the interview process. These data reflection tools noted student's weaknesses, strengths, and teacher's next steps for the 2018-2019 school year. Open-ended semistructured interviews were conducted of the top 25% of third grade reading teachers' whose student classroom averages increased the most for the 2018-2019 school year on the district reading benchmark assessments. Additionally, each of the participants whose students made the most gains from October 2018 to March 2019 on the district reading benchmark assessments used their data reflection tools from October, January, and March of the 2018-2019 school year. Interview data were collected through interview protocol and audio recordings.

3. Result

For this study, two sources of data, interviews and classroom observations, were used. First, participants were interviewed, and once the interviews were complete, classroom observations were conducted. The information collected from the interviews and classroom observations were coded to identify: potential themes, patterns, and to develop a visual description of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After each interview and observation, the process of coding done for discovering similar themes to determine if the research questions answered and, if not, how to rephrase the questions or the observation checklist to answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once themes or patterns started to emerge, emergent codes were developed from these and noted on a spreadsheet with the responses from the participants listed under the specific codes (Stuckey, 2015). This process used to develop a description of the themes throughout the interviews and observations. Several steps, such as member checks, triangulation, and peer debriefing, guaranteed the accuracy of the information obtained in the research. Peer debriefing allowed for recognition of the information not

covered by research questions or help to find any biases.

3.1 Research Questions

The collected data analyzed was based on the conceptual framework from Weimer's (2013) research on learner-centered instructional strategies. The perspectives of the participants, classroom observations provided information on how teachers use Weimer's LCI strategies to instruct and engage ELL students in their social studies classes. To understand the ELL social studies instructional approach, the following research questions were used to support this research study:

RQ1: How are teachers using Weimer's LC instructional strategies to instruct and engage ELL students in their social studies classes at Northeastern School?

RQ2: How do teachers plan their instruction for ELLs in social studies classes using Weimer's learner-centered approach?

3.1.1 Research Question 1

RQ1: How are teachers using Weimer's LC instructional strategies to instruct and engage ELL students in their social studies classes at Northeastern School?

Common items were gathered among the recognized codes and grouped the codes into categories to create themes related to ELL social studies teachers' perspectives of learner-centered instructional strategies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Research Question 1: Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Themes

Open code	Axial code/temporary theme	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choice Students led Facilitator role Assessment 	Definition of learner-centered instruction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student-led Student engagement 	Student-led classroom	Knowledge of learner-centered instructional strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions Teamwork Peer support Interactive Small group 	Small group instruction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitator 	Teacher	The teacher is a reflective learner

-
- Mentor
-
- Facilitation plan
 - Helps students
 - Teach motivational skills
 - Teach coping skills
-

In addition to interviews classroom observations of participants teaching social studies were conducted. The observation of participants in natural teaching settings revealed the technique teachers used in their social studies classrooms. A research developed observation protocol was used and notes were taken while observing teachers' methods of teaching social studies components. Themes were captured (see Table 2). The following themes revealed concepts related to ELL social studies teachers.

Table 2. Instructional Strategies Observed or Stated to Be Used by Teachers

Teacher	P1&8	P2	P3&7	P4	P5&9	P6&10
Emphasis on thoughtful exploration of complicated issues	O		X			
Different activities take place during class, sometimes simultaneously		X	X		O	O
Whole class direct instruction	O	O	X			
Small group instruction	X		X	X		X
Peer tutoring					O	
One-on-one instruction	X	X	O	O	O	O

Theme 1: Knowledge of Learner-Centered Instructional Strategies

A teacher's understanding of a concept affects their performance in creating an outcome, so it was essential to understand if ELL social studies teachers understood and defined LCI. Participants defined LCI as to when the learner placed in the middle of classroom life—the idea of LCI elaborated in three ways in interviews. All participants defined LCI strategies.

Knowing the learner. Participant 1 and 5 believed “LCI means that every student is known not just by the teacher but by other students in the room. LCI contains many human interactions that include students knowing each other and being known. LCI includes many voices, ideas of everyone filling the room.”

Participant 2, 6, and 7 believed in shared activities with students is essential. Participants stated learner-centered means being focused on his students. Participants continued students; not the subject must be the focus of the classroom. Participant 6 mentioned “LCI means that teachers must know

students and recognize them well.” Participant 6 continued “A teacher must learn about the student’s capabilities at the beginning of the school year and find out about the student’s academic skills and abilities.”

Participant 3, 8, and 9 believed “if teachers stop interrupting, students do the classwork assignment and learn the subject by themselves.” Participant 3 discussed “She would stand by and do not interrupt students with the classwork task the day she realized students did not need her.” Participant 3 continued “When students actively work on their classwork assignments and are involved in learning the subject, students show that they liked their activities and motivated. That is the time that I do not have to do anything and interrupt students.”

Participant 4 and 10 believed teachers are not *laissez-faire* instructors. Participant 10 believed “Teachers work hard with their students, which means setting learning goals and procedures in their plans.” Participant 4 stated “Teachers always see themselves involved with students learning. Teachers remained observant, willing to allow students the freedom to learn but ready to help and guided when needed—being learner-centered meant having distant and indirect instruction.” However, during the classroom observations, it was evident that Participant 4 and 10 did not remain observant and were unwilling to allow students the freedom to learn and did not have distant and indirect instruction. Participants 4 and 10 mostly followed teacher-centered instructions.

Small group instruction. Participants mentioned small group instruction as an LCI strategy. Small group instruction can meet the needs of 9 to 12 grade ELL social studies students. Participant 5 discussed “Small group discussions that help ELLs to learn and comprehend the new subject.” P6 stated, “Students can discuss their ideas about the topic, and I would like to hear that. During classroom observations, it was noted that four teachers were doing individual instruction with only one student during small group instructions. This way, ELL students could catch up with comprehending and clarifying the subject.” Participant 8 stated, “When I have five to eight students in the classroom, they have various problems, and if I don’t work on their problem, they sit and do nothing. Students do not complete the task because students are stuck with not understanding the subject. That’s why I line them up and work in a small group to check students’ problems.” This discussion indicated that the teacher has limited awareness of the LCI strategies and how to implement LCI in their lesson plans.

Building on student experiences. Participant 1, 5, and 7 concerned that “Some teachers made few connections to students’ lives. I had the idea that what students are experiencing in their real lives outside of the classroom is essential.” Participant 5 stated “I am not sure we care about that. Teachers might want to know what students are experiencing in their lives and try to organize classrooms around those needs, but teachers do not bring that life into the school.” Participant 1, 5, 7 believed “instruction that building upon learners’ interests would result in higher learning. In my classroom, instead of being a textbook and teacher-centered teacher, I became a student-centered teacher, and it made lots of difference in the world.” Participant 1 found that “Students were like adults; if students attracted to a subject, they learn it, remember, retain, and they could give it back to you. I believed the notion that

being learner-centered required teachers to individualize their instruction and teach based on individual students' needs."

Participant 2, 8, and 9 a ninth-grade teacher, believed "LIC means that teachers must try to individualize instruction in the classroom so that whatever subject students are learning about is individualized for each ELL student. Learning social studies include the reading that students do, the context that students learn, and how students learn." Participant 8 said "Some students need to know how to work in groups, and the teacher must encourage students to work in a group." Participant 9 stated "Some students need more reading practice. Some students need to learn how to let others take the lead."

Participant 3 stated "The teacher must find the things that each student needs to work on and help with the work." The participant 3 stated "It was always part of being deeply involved, deeply committed to the process of the presentation, or whatever. But I have never felt that I had to be the central figure. And that is a real guiding force. I think maybe that is one of the things that I realized that I did not have to be part of the centerpiece."

Participant 4 believed "I am what students need her to be." Participant 4 stated "She also helps students to build confidence and find that students' visions are possible, that their thoughts are good, and that they are capable of doing and being anything, they want to be." Participant 4 "I tried to implement the concept of if students work, students learn better together than if they do the task individually." Participant 4 and 10 stated that "The teacher role is complicated." Participant 10 "I thought the magic word is a facilitator. Teachers must be a general overseer and sometimes dispute manager." However, during the classroom observations, it was noted that participants 4 and 10 were not changing roles as Participant 10 mentioned "a keynote speaker and sometimes the cheerleading section." Participants 4 and 10 did not alter instructional strategies and continued teacher-centered lectures; their position as the student academic needs did not change.

Teacher promotes active engagement. Participant 1, 5, 6, and 8 stated "Students must be excited and active participants in their learning. I describe my classroom as busy and noisy with student-organized energy." Participant 9 stated "I had a unique way of promoting students' active involvement." Participant 1 believed "Teaching in a mixed level class must have daily class meetings such as what students need to do that day." Participant 1 continued "She was asking students if they need anything from him or the student-teacher? And then, students start the group work assignment. We meet at the end of the class, and students would report on what they had learned that day and how much more time they were going to need to get it done."

Participant 2, 4, and 7 a nine-grade teacher, "I shared my experience by bringing ELL students out of class and involving them in exploring their community as a result of a mid-year move." Participant 2 stated that "I had field trips to the museum to change my classroom environment, and students flourished." Participant 7 stated "We used the community outside our laboratory. That was an exciting year because I was doing what I believed students needed to learn the language." Participant 3, 9, and

10 described LCI as a vigorous class. However, during the classroom observation, it was noted that students were not always active and were not on task and involved in personal discussion during the planning and learning of the content. Participants 3, 9, and 10 spent some time figuring out ways to engage students. Participant 9 stated: “So, I have got this idea I have got this lesson, I have got this unit, I have got this curriculum, how are they going to start grabbing into it and say, well, ok, we will take some of that.”

Theme 2: The Teacher Is a Reflective Learner

The teacher, as a learner, was a strong element of the lived definition of LCI. Participants talked about three essential ways about themselves as learners. Participants’ discussions revealed various definitions of LCI.

Participants as students and students as teachers. Participant 10 described during her interview “I never have a day that one does not learn from the students because of the way they perceive things. It is incredible what they can bring in from the world they are living in and what they are seeing. But it is because I tried to make my classroom; I have always tried to make my class LCI. When students had a hard time, I had a hard time. And that is what I mean grow with them grow emotionally, spiritually, and academically with them because they know so much that you do not know.”

Teachers shared experiences. Participant 6, and 9 stated “There was a time that students wanted to study biography and make a movie. The participant did not know how to use a camera, so she started to learn how to make a movie and use a camera. The participant gave a chance to students to make a choice. Students could decide how to learn to make the movie, how to study the subject, and where to start.”

Participant 2, 5, 8, and 10 “I felt comfortable receiving decisions from students.” Participant 7 stated “Students make decisions. Students agree on their needs and how to fulfill their needs in the classroom. Later, we design plans together based on students’ needs and what is necessary to know and create learning opportunities. We decide what is needed in the learning and process the learning opportunity.”

As Participant 3 talked about the study of biography that she and her students pursued, she discussed that “Students’ decision making was positive to keep her excited about teaching.” Participant 3 stated “She was teaching ten years, and there is always something new in the curriculum. If the participant had to do a biography, she never was sure how it was since students decide how to shape up the plans.”

Participant 4, and 10 believed that “Students know what they need to learn. Participants 4, and 10 “Felt in the sense of discovery to discover how much students know and what students want to determine, which is highly effective in students learning. If teachers take history books and distribute them to the students and say what students need to know and what to learn, students know how to get there. Students do learn the subject and learn with a great deal of integrity and ownership.”

Participant 1, 6, and 8 a twelve-grade teacher, wanted to be more involved in the students’ choice-making. Participant 8 indicated that “ELL LCI could be a facilitator of various subjects. In this case, Students are the decision-makers and make a choice. However, students’ choice is within

teachers' requirements that must be done. Teachers must live with the students' preferences, but teachers must be careful and monitor students' works."

Participant 2 and 9 "felt the challenges that they were facing on LCI." Although the choice is essential in learner-centered education, participant 2 had the "Struggle to help ELL students make good choices. Students always have significant and vital decisions. However, teachers must be careful about how to put students in a position to make a real right choice. Give choices and where they are directing their education or their learning? Those were pieces that were missing, and I think through Foxfire, through the Core Practices, that has happened."

Participant 3 and 5 believed in "Students' voices and ideas in the classroom." Participant 5 "I advise teachers to give a chance for students to express their opinions. Unless teachers allow students to have a voice in their learning and to feel like students are an essential part of that classroom, teachers are harming students and themselves, and you do not need to be in the profession."

Participants believed that ELL learners could make good choices and the right decisions that result in students learning. Participants felt that to be learner-centered teachers, must work hard to connect the curriculum to learners' interests and desires. Teachers must lead through facilitation and continuously learn to be ready for paths their students take.

3.2 Research Question 2

RQ2: How do teachers plan their instruction for ELLs in social studies classes using Weimer's learner-centered approach?

Through semistructured interviews with participants, the questions helped the researcher to understand their views of ELL LCI. This way, participants had the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas about learner-centered teaching, shared practices they had with LCI, and provided examples of how they use the strategies in their ELL social studies classrooms. Through the interview process, the conversations with the participants about their views of LCI when teaching social studies were more involved; interviews allowed for asking further questions for clarification, and identifying the themes that developed from participants' answers.

Through open and axial coding, the primary key ideas that emerged from the interview data through the framework of LCI were identified. Coding was used to highlight words and phrases repeated throughout the interview transcripts and acknowledged standard labels as open codes based on the interview transcripts.

By using classroom observations, it was noted that each participant taught social studies in their classrooms. Open and axial coding was used to find out the central ideas that emerged from the interview and observation data through the framework of LCI. This resulted in two themes being identified: Knowledge of learner-centered instructional strategies in social studies; and preparedness to teach ELL LCI. This procedure was also used on the classroom observations, which resulted in the same two themes being identified. These two themes revealed how the social studies teachers perceived the learner-centered instructional strategies to support ELL academic achievement (see Table 3).

Table 3. Research Question 2: Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Themes

Open code	Axial code/ temporary theme	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-on-one Feedback Revision Explanations In-depth 	One-on-one instruction	Knowledge of learner-centered instructional strategies in social studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions Teamwork Peer support Interactive Small group Whole group 	Small group instruction Whole group instruction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works at own pace Choice of work location Student choice of activity Student choice of courses 	Student choice	Preparedness to teach ELL learner-centered instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overwhelmed in professional development Broad professional development 	Professional development too broad	

4. Discussion

The instrumental case study that led to the creation of this research was focused on exploring the LCI practices used at the study site and how teachers were using Weimer's framework to engage ELLs in social studies at Northeastern School. As a result of this research, a 3-day online professional development was developed with the purpose of improving teachers' knowledge and skills about LCI with the desired outcome of having teachers more effectively and consistently implement the LCI strategy of small group discussions within their lessons.

The purpose of the research study was to increase teachers' knowledge and skills to effectively implement the LCI strategy of small group discussions within their lessons. Supporting goals focus on teachers' understanding of the five core skills of academic conversations and how to incorporate depth of knowledge and Bloom's taxonomy into the right standards-based questions. By incorporating these into a learner-centered model, it may be possible to help students become academically successful and

take responsibility for their learning.

Furthermore, the teachers will learn Francis's (2016) eight types of questioning to encourage discussions and implement them in their classrooms. The sub goals of the 3-day professional development sessions, based on Francis's work, are to provide the teachers with the knowledge to:

- define the facilitator of learning,
- explain why discussions are essential,
- write right standards-based questions incorporating depth of expertise and Bloom's taxonomy, and
- increase the number of conversations in their lesson plans.

4.1.1 Limitations

The research is limited to the LCI method within a small group discussions model at Northeastern School. Moreover, the research is defined by teachers' capabilities to create small group discussions in their lesson plans. Teachers will not learn all elements of questioning if they do not participate in all follow-up sessions (Francis, 2016). Thus, some teachers may not be able to implement all of the required discussions in their lesson plans. Furthermore, if teachers find it difficult to attend the monthly follow-up sessions, they will not learn all eight types of questions (Francis, 2016). This could result in some teachers not fully implementing discussions into their daily lessons.

4.1.2 Implications for Future Research

Continued professional development may benefit ninth- to 12th-grade ELL social studies teachers at Northeastern School by providing support for the implementation of small group discussions in their lesson plans. This research may also help teachers at other schools in the city and state. The ELL students of teachers served by this research study may gain support to increase their educational achievement. Students who work after graduation may benefit from small group discussions and develop stronger communication, critical thinking, and collaboration skills. The research may also help to increase ELL students' graduation rates and prevent ELL students from wasting extra years in high school. Students can start working and supporting their families when they graduate and may study at postsecondary institutions. The study can also help other schools and teachers to create an LCI model in their lesson plans. However, communities have different demographics that must be measured to create a new program based on Weimer's (2013) LCI strategy. The information gained from the literature guided the need for LCI instead of teacher-centered and traditional instruction.

4.1.3 Conclusion

While working on this research, little research had been completed on the impact of LCI strategies on ELL high school students. Teachers' interviews revealed the need to focus on small group discussions to implement into daily lessons to help ELL students achieve in their academic studies. More research needs to be conducted to determine which LCI strategies described by Weimer (2013) work best with ELL students with different personal motivations, ages, disabilities, educational backgrounds, mother tongues, and cultural capital backgrounds. Teachers may gain a better understanding of how to work

with ELL students and create strategies that help them with academic achievement.

Learner-centered instructional strategies have proven to be more successful than traditional teacher-centered instruction (Weimer, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to implement LCI strategies into ELL students' lesson plans. Students can learn subjects using small group discussions that require them to discuss their ideas based on evidence. This research may help students in their education, supporting them in developing the communication, cooperation, questioning, and critical thinking skills that employers are seeking in the individuals whom they hire. Finding out how teachers view LCI strategies is crucial to successfully implementing LCI in lesson plans.

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