Using learner-centred content in the classroom

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Engaging students in speaking in the second language classroom is not always an easy task. There are many factors which might hold a student back, some outside of the teachers control – how confident the student is, their intrinsic interest in the language, what is happening in their life outside of the classroom – and others that the teacher is directly able to influence, such as the extent to which students are given linguistic and other materials or resources to help them, or the partner that they are assigned to work with. A further factor within the control of the teacher is the content or topic of the task itself.

This paper will consider some of the issues connected to choosing engaging topics and designing learner-centred content, and will highlight the importance of trying to do so. It will go on to consider what learner-centred content might look like in the language classroom, as well as considering the relevance of learner-generated content. It will finish by considering the classroom implications of these conclusions and by asking the question: is providing learner-centred content enough to engage language learners in speaking activities?

CHOOSING ENGAGING TOPICS

DESIGNING CONTENT
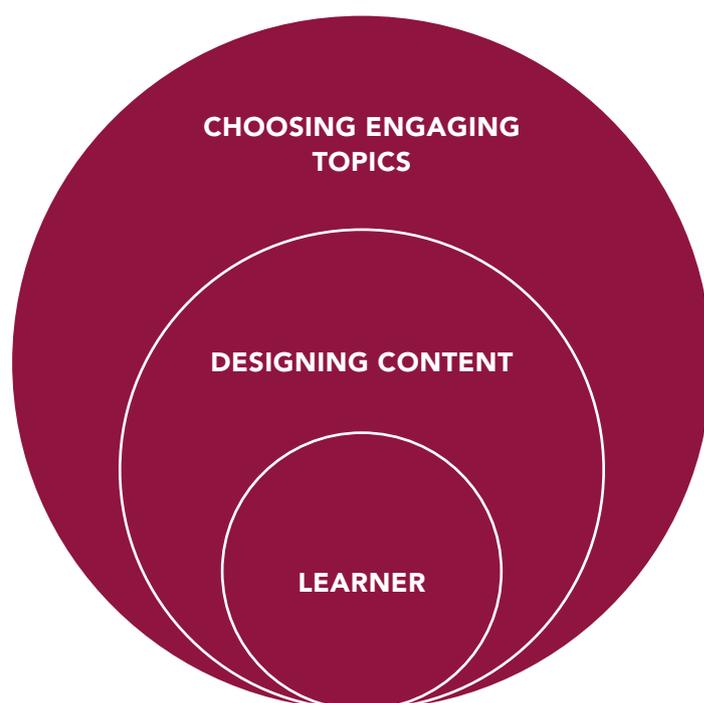
LEARNER

Why is learner-centred content important?

Learner-centred content is a central principle in many different theories and approaches related to second language teaching and learning. For example, 'Making the teaching materials relevant to learners' is a basic strategy used to generate initial motivation, as a part of an overall motivational teaching practice (Dörnyei, 2001). Although not all of the motivational strategies put forward in Dörnyei's taxonomy are relevant to all learning contexts, some "do appear to be valued universally by teachers and learners" (Lamb, 2017: 304), and there is evidence that this is one strategy that is remarkably robust across contexts.[1]

> Conversely, classroom content that is not centred around students, and where students are not able to see the relevance of the tasks they are completing to their lives outside of the classroom, can act as "one of the most demotivating factors for learners"

The same sentiment can be found in two of Dörnyei and Csizér's "Ten commandments for motivating language learners" – 'make the language classes interesting' and 'personalise the learning process' (1998: 215) – and the importance of 'personal significance' is likewise a key maxim within the context of the Principled Communicative Approach (a recent, research informed development to communicative language teaching; Arnold, Dörnyei & Pugliese, 2015). The first of the seven principles put forward is the personal significance principle, which states that a basic tenet of student-centred teaching is that it "should be meaning-focused and personally significant as a whole" (10).

The importance of engaging with students through personalised content is also underpinned in current approaches to motivation. Theories of language learning motivation were turned on their head in 2005 with the introduction of the L2 motivational self system, and the idea of the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). A language learner's ideal L2 self is the imagined version of themselves that they would ideally like to become in the future. For example, this might be someone able to travel and use English as a lingua franca, or someone who holds a respected position in an international company. The ideal L2 self can be a powerful motivator (cf. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), and one building block for teachers to be able to help students create an ideal L2 self is by engaging fully with students, and understanding "who they are and what unique life experiences, dreams, and worries they bring into the classroom" (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014: 157).

Conversely, classroom content that is not centred around students, and where students are not able to see the relevance of the tasks they are completing to their lives outside of the classroom, can act as "one of the most demotivating factors for learners" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 116; Kikuchi, 2015).

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1 See the following for examples of several recent studies conducted in Saudi Arabia (Moskovsky, Alrabai, Paolini & Ratcheva, 2013), Korea (Poupore, 2014), and Sweden (Henry, Korp, Sundqvist & Thorsen, 2017).

The status quo: learner-centred content and published teaching materials

Although the importance of learner-centred content is far from new (cf. Nunan, 1988), the importance of finding new and effective ways to engage learners has increased in recent years in tandem with the rise in the popularity of communicative language teaching (CLT), where communication between students is a necessity for successful learning to take place (Senior, 2006: 169). In CLT classrooms, speaking activities tend to be less prescriptive than might have been seen with previous methodological approaches, and therefore require greater levels of investment on the part of the learner. As Murphy states more generally, too: "the success of teaching rests largely on the student's involvement in the learning process" (1999: 365).

In most classrooms, this involvement is strongly influenced by the textbook. After all, it is the textbook which defines the topics and provides many of the activities that teachers rely on in the classroom. However, as textbooks are required to cater for a global audience, this naturally limits the boundaries of what might be included. Effective textbook topics have been described as "provocative but not offensive, intellectually stimulating but not too arcane, and popular but not bland" (Hedge, 2000: 351). However, it is far from certain that even such carefully considered topics will match with the interests and experiences of all students, in all of the classroom contexts that can be found around the world.

With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that despite the fact that new and updated textbooks are published every year, there has been a growing tendency for teachers to engage in their own materials development to supplement published resources to teach speaking (Hughes, 2017: 73). A study gathering the views of British Council English language teachers from eight countries clearly highlights that the primary reason for this is to try to create learner-centred content (Hughes, 2017: 74): "Learners want to talk about their own things; their own lives".

This is made still more difficult when we acknowledge that not only will what counts as an 'engaging topic' differ across the wide range of language learning contexts found around the globe, but also even over time within a single class group.

School experiences lack the authenticity of leisure-time experiences

Teachers regularly turn to the media, the internet, or to the world immediately outside of the classroom environment to supplement materials, looking for 'hooks' and 'ways in' to keep their students engaged. These resources might

include radio, social media, YouTube or TED talks (the last of which has even led to its own textbook series). There is a growing need for teachers to go to greater and greater lengths in order to try to bridge the gap between the content that students are presented with inside of the classroom, and their lives outside of it (Henry, 2013). This trend is also reflected in modern textbooks themselves, which are incorporating more and more real-world material to try to achieve the same objective of making the content more learner-centred, for example with media, video and other content from National Geographic, Discovery, the BBC or similar organisations.

Learner-centred content in an increasingly globalised world

In a world where English is becoming increasingly prevalent, in some countries it is not unusual for learners to come into contact with and regularly use English outside of the classroom. In many places English has lost the 'foreign language' status it once had (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), and some countries – for example Sweden and other countries in Scandinavia – have experienced "an overwhelming Anglicization" (Cabau, 2009: 134). This has meant that while Swedish schoolchildren may still only receive a few hours English tuition every week, this comprises only a small fraction of their overall contact with the language. This creates a stark divide between the English language that these students encounter inside and outside of the classroom, and has resulted in an inescapable negative impact on motivation in the context of classroom-based language learning (Henry, 2013, 2014; Henry & Cliffordson, 2015). As Alastair Henry and his colleagues describe, it is simply that "school experiences lack the authenticity of leisure-time experiences" (2017: 7). In these contexts, learner-centred content takes on an even greater level of importance.

Key principles in the design of learner-centred content

Learner-centred content can take many different forms – from tweaking an existing speaking activity so that it includes a topic chosen by students, to designing a six-week project around a cause particularly important to a learner group. This section highlights techniques, suggestions and examples for the design of learner-centred content. Many of these principles are drawn from the literature surrounding projects and project-based learning (a methodology that is only successful if students care about the topic) but this is equally relevant when designing classroom activities: as Harmer puts it, "the difference between a full-blown project and some writing or speaking tasks is chiefly one of scale" (2007: 279).

Use learners' lives and experiences as input

Building content around the lives and experiences of the learners in the classroom is a straightforward and practical way to try to ensure that learners find a topic engaging (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). This might come simply from their sharing their life experiences with peers (Senior, 2006: 191), or from more a formalised approach such as "Learners' Lives as Curriculum" (Weinstein, 1999, 2006). Here, learners' lives and experiences are used as the basis for task design and other materials development. One example of this is Agard (1999), who describes an activity in which women from a rural tribe in Laos create a book for their children living in the US, full of pictures and descriptions of village life.

Learners' lives and experiences can also be used in speaking tasks designed to develop accuracy as well as fluency, as one teacher describes: "When I do my language focus I ask them to give examples from their daily lives – and it's so much more meaningful than that imaginary person in the book doing something or other." (Senior, 2006: 190).

Create content around a topic that students are passionate about

This passion might build from an existing interest, or stem from teachers actively striving to peak learners' curiosity (Senior, 2006: 187). The easiest way to find out about students' existing interests is to ask them: a homework assignment could be to bring in examples of three things that they found interesting during the week (from newspaper articles to a new pair of trainers to the prospectus from a university they are considering attending), or to put students into groups during a lesson to suggest 'three interesting topics I want to talk about this semester' – these could then be written up on the board so the teacher can gauge how the rest of the class responds to them.

To try to peak learners' curiosity, teachers might highlight things that students may not be aware of: for example, an upcoming event, a new technological innovation, or a possible project or challenge that students could get involved with. Although it is inevitable that not all suggestions would 'catch on' with students, these suggestions would become increasingly more informed the better a teacher came to know his/her students. If these were introduced at the end of a week or of a class, students might vote on which they wanted to know more about the next time the class met, therefore further 'ramping up' the level of curiosity and suspense!

It is also important to get feedback on the topics that you use in class by asking students what they think. One way to find this out (and also to find out about other elements of the student experience more generally) is through 'action logging', (Murphey, 1993). This could be as simple as students writing a short two-minute diary entry at the end of each lesson, including details of what they enjoyed most/least, or the most important thing they feel that they learned from the lesson.

> When I do my language focus I ask them to give examples from their daily lives – and it's so much more meaningful than that imaginary person in the book doing something or other

There is another reason why it is important to get feedback on the topics that you introduce in class (or that you plan to introduce in the future). Even though a topic is related to students' lives, it may be that it is too personal or 'too close to home' for students to feel comfortable discussing it with peers in the classroom. It is essential to remember that students may not have the confidence or the language abilities to 'speak up' if they are uncomfortable (especially if the teacher has a different first language). A practical way to manage this might be with a blind ballot, whereby students are given a list of topics and asked to choose one of the following responses: (1) 'I would be happy to talk about this topic', (2) 'I might be happy to talk about this topic, depending on what the question was', and (3) 'I would not want to talk about this topic'. This could be done regularly throughout a course, with space left also for students to suggest their own ideas.

An excellent example of a teacher tapping into her students' passions can be found dramatized in the 2007 film Freedom Writers. Based on a true story (first published in The Freedom Writers Diary, 1999), it tells of the transformation of a group of 'unteachable' inner-city teenagers in Long Beach, California, through a project in which the teacher engaged with them as 'people' and jumped on a passion which she saw was growing among them. On a smaller scale, too, this has been exemplified by Samant (2002), who reports on success with students authoring a petition to police against illegal liquor sales, an issue highly relevant to their personal context.

Link engaging content to a real-world context, outcome or application

Linking to a real-world context: A language classroom always exists within a wider school and community context, and recognising this fact can be a further approach to creating learner-centred content. This could be created by linking content to students' lives, experiences and interests outside of the language classroom (as described above),

and a more global example is given by Gu (2001) who describes a task which paired Chinese and US students were each challenged to introduce their home cities to the other group via various media through the internet.

Linking to a real-world outcome: A basic principle within project based approaches to teaching is that a clear, engaging and tangible outcome – often agreed in consultation with the students – functions to direct effort and attention. This can have a substantial difference with how students engage with a task, and part of the reason for this is because it creates an additional level of accountability (that is, students cannot hide a poor result from their friends if they have not put much effort in). For example, this could be achieved by teachers working with students to create a list of criteria by which students will judge their own work when they have completed it (for example a new display board celebrating student achievements to be put up in the school). If students are unable to achieve any of the outcomes they had hoped for, these criteria could be used to discuss what students found difficult or what they particularly enjoyed, and this could be used itself as a basis for future lesson plans.

Linking to a real-world application: Another way to link content to the 'real world' is for students to complete work that actually has real-life applications. For example, students could create a school newsletter, a website to share with another school, or a 'survival guide' to be given to students in another class or the school year below (this could be particularly useful if students are about to begin a period of study abroad, although could also include more straightforward advice for exam revision or for developing confidence with speaking in public, to be given to their peers).

Consider using technology to support activities

Although the use of technology will not necessarily suddenly make a boring topic interesting, in many contexts around the world technology has become a central part of everyday life. Not only can including aspects of technology provide variety to the everyday classroom routine, but a further way to ensure that content is learner-centred can be to draw on the ever growing number of technological innovations designed to support student learning. Further to including media, video or other online content in lessons, a growing number of programmes and applications can be tailored for use in class (for example using Kahoot[2] to play games that are quick and easy for teachers to prepare and

that students participate in through their mobile phones, or Edmodo[3], an online platform from which teachers can – among other things – assign homework, schedule quizzes, manage student progress and play games). Many textbooks also come with digital resources now too, such as practice activities, games and communication tools.

The internet can also allow students to more easily research and personalise a topic to their interests in a way that is not always possible solely with hard copy reference texts. For example, teachers might ask students to research and choose a place in London they think would be the most fun to visit, before introducing it to the rest of the group to try to persuade them to 'sign up' to visit too. Teachers might also use the internet as a resource themselves in this way, for example by bringing to life a text about Malala with YouTube videos about life in Pakistan, news reports of her being shot, and video footage of her giving a speech at the United Nations. Not only can this increase engagement with the topic – for example by presenting clips in a way that makes students want to continue watching to find out what happens next – but this can also help students gain a far deeper understanding of the original text itself.

Give students choices

Benefits from personalisation can be achieved by allowing learners even very simple freedoms, such as allowing students to choose the order in which they complete a certain set of tasks or where appropriate the topic of discussion or the character they act out during a role play.

By asking students what they hope to achieve from a course, we might provide them with tangible choices as to how they might actively work towards achieving this. For example, this might be through adding in an additional language focus to a piece of writing homework, or through a challenge to achieve specific reading or speaking goals in between lessons. Teachers might also use this information to tailor course content, or give students choice by allowing them to contribute more widely to the aims and stated outcomes of a course. The teacher would, however, need to make a judgement as to the overall level

of appropriateness of any suggestions given (cf. Harmer, 2007, Chapter 21; Hedge, 2000, Chapter 10; Nunan, 1988).

Finally, consider challenging students to 'go big'

In recent years, projects have experienced a resurgence in popularity in educational contexts, and within the field of ELT, projects have been used to achieve extraordinary learning outcomes. Although projects are not suitable for every learning context (or for all points during a school year), challenging students to 'run' with a topic that they are passionate about can push them to achieve outcomes over and above what they might have believed possible (Dörnyei, Henry & Muir, 2016). This might be through organising a charity fundraising event, putting on a school play, or perhaps through a 'service learning approach' (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995) in which lesson content is built up from students' experiences of volunteering with local groups or charities (this might also be achieved in virtual environments if the classroom is not in an English-speaking context).

Is it possible for a teacher to create learner-centred content without direct input from students?

Unless a teacher knows his/her students very well, there is always a risk in trying to guess what topics any group of students may (or may not) find engaging. If, for example, a group spent a lesson raving about Adele or Gregory Porter's latest single, how could the teacher be sure that a lesson built around these lyrics would be a hit with the class, and that it was not merely thanks to an inside joke that the song was being talked about or that it wasn't secondary to another interest (for example, as the background music to a video they had watched on an entirely different subject)? It is also possible that even with the best intentions teachers may unknowingly submit to cultural, gender or other stereotypes (either their own or their students') in picking topics they believe will engage them. One way to step around this is to look to learner-generated content, of which some of the above are examples.

2 https://kahoot.com/welcomeback/
3 https://www.edmodo.com/

Learner-centred content versus learner-generated content

One way to ensure that the materials presented to students are engaging is to involve them in the design and generation of the materials themselves. As the name suggests, learner-generated content is content which is created either by the learners, or by learners of comparative demographics, for example students of a similar age, nationality or learning context. Learner-generated content might refer to any stage of the learning or teaching process: from designing the syllabus, through input into task design and methods of assessment.

Compared to teacher-generated content, in some contexts learner-generated content has been demonstrated to result in higher levels of student engagement, positive affective responses (for example, students reporting higher levels of enjoyment), and greater levels of investment in the learning process. Importantly, these effects have also been found to occur at all proficiency levels (Lambert, 1997, 2002; Lambert & Minn, 2007; Lambert, Philp & Nakamura, 2017). Although content generated by learners is not always preferable to teacher-generated content (the latter of which is more predictable than content generated by learners, something especially important in exam based classes, for example), it can nevertheless result in a sound approach to the development of learner-centred content.

One example of an approach built firmly on the principles of learner-generated content is 'Dogme ELT', summed up in the three following core principles: that teaching should be conversation-driven, materials-light, and focus on emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009: 8). It is important to note that this approach is not necessarily 'anti-materials'. In fact, it may be that some readily available texts are appropriate for specific classrooms (for example, an article from a local English newspaper or an extract from a regional radio programme/podcast). Instead of being built around a chosen textbook, the focus of teaching is centred on the students themselves and the context they are in, and because materials are predominantly learner-generated this allows for not only the topics to be learner-centred, but also the areas for language development that arise to be similarly relevant to the learner group in the classroom. The development of this approach stems directly from the fact that – as already discussed above – teachers are already developing their own materials to make sure that it is learner-centred: Dogme ELT provides a framework to help teachers facilitate the further inclusion of student-generated, firmly student-centred content.

Taking the principle of learner-generated content one step further has seen learners take control in the design of an

'alternative textbook'. As Meddings and Thornbury quote from one teacher who challenged their students to do just this: "My inert students started naming issues I had never suspected they were interested in", and of the students themselves: "Working on the Alternative Textbook gives us the opportunity to choose themes which are more important and useful than those in the textbook" (2009: 15). Although such an approach might rarely be applicable in most contexts, the same positive outcomes might be achieved even if students were to design a single lesson or activity, or if they were to outline a smaller speaking and listening syllabus as part of a wider curriculum.

Tips for using learner-generated content in the classroom

It is important that learners do not feel that they are 'doing the work' of either the teacher or the textbook. It might be useful to explain to students the aims of the task and the specific ways it will help to develop their language development. This is especially important because students are likely to be asked to do things that are very different from what they might be used to doing in their language classes.

There is no set syllabus or curriculum in a Dogme ELT classroom, and so the importance of a focus on students' individual goals becomes even more important to allow learners to see their personal development throughout a course. In addition to encouraging students to think about what they want to achieve at the outset, students' goals should be regularly evaluated and students encouraged to consider how they might use every lesson to develop an element (or several elements) of their personal learning goals. In this respect it would also be important to encourage learners to keep a 'learning journal', to keep track of the skills and language that they are developing each lesson.

Due to the fact that initial input will come from students' language production, it is likely that language issues will arise that are unexpected. Rather than try to manipulate the lesson to include any anticipated language focus a teacher may have had going into the lesson, it is imperative to be flexible to allow for a true 'focus on emergent language', as will best benefit the learners in any given classroom.

General classroom implications

Ensuring that teaching content is engaging for learners is only one factor that will contribute to learners' engagement in speaking activities. The list below highlights just a few of the many other factors that may also contribute:[4]

- Language leaning anxiety can be a debilitating hurdle when engaging with speaking tasks in the classroom, which a positive group dynamic and an engaging topic on their own may not be sufficient to overcome without more personalised intervention.

- Students' personal goals for their language learning are fundamental to influencing how a student will engage in the classroom, so even if a student is passionate about a particular topic, if their wider personal goals do not relate to being able to speak English it is likely they will have little overall motivation to participate.

- Other factors related to the learning environment, for example the time of the class or the physical classroom environment (e.g. the temperature of the room or how light/dark it is).

Of such factors, there are three key prerequisites of particular importance when preparing the groundwork for success with engaging and learner-centred content. (cf. Dörnyei, Henry & Muir, 2016).

1. Appropriate classroom dynamics

Without a positive group dynamic, success will not be possible with even the most engaging of content. Through appropriate teacher leadership it is essential that learners feel supported and valued within a cohesive group, and that they feel comfortable and competent in their personal role within the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Without this basis, a teacher cannot hope to connect with a class sufficiently to be able to encourage them to 'open up' and share information about their lives and experiences. A teacher might first model this by sharing some personal stories of his/her own. (For more suggestions about creating a good group dynamic, see 'Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom', another paper in this series.)

2. A change in teacher mindsets

Teaching in two-way, dialogic contexts such as these require a very different mindset when compared to teaching in a more 'teacher-controlled' classroom. This might include a greater openness to cooperation (with students, colleagues or individuals outside of the immediate classroom context), being prepared to go the extra mile to engage and connect with students, and possibly even being prepared for failure with some of the tasks, activities or topics that are used for the first time (but not being discouraged by this!).

3. Ensuring adequate support structure and facilities

Whether a task draws on personal or cultural knowledge, or knowledge of local or international issues, for students to be able to engage fully it is critical that they either have sufficient existing knowledge or that they believe they are able to access the knowledge and resources they need to be able to complete the task successfully. The better that teachers know their students, the better they will be able to make these judgements.

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4 For ideas on solving some of these issues, see 'Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom', another paper in this series.

Conclusion

Introducing learner-centred content is a fundamental principle to increasing student engagement and it underpins many approaches to motivating language learners. This paper has discussed some of the ways this might be achieved and some of the benefits of doing so, although it does not mean to suggest that all classroom materials be dictated in this way: teacher-generated content can be more predictable than learner-generated topics or content, and in some instances may be similarly learner-centred and achieve similarly positive outcomes. Teachers are tasked with managing a large number of priorities when putting together a lesson plan, and it is important to emphasise that these priorities should not "confuse fun with learning" (Senior, 2006: 181). Nevertheless, ensuring that content is relevant and engaging to learners will forever remain at the centre of a teacher's primary responsibilities to his/her students.

LEARNER CENTRED

TEACHER CENTRED
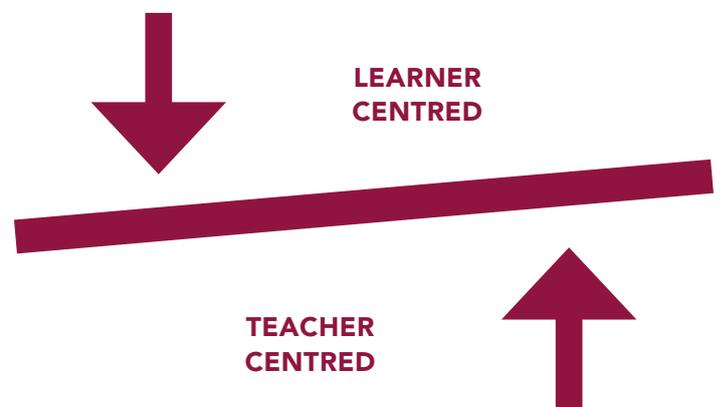
Recommendations for further reading

The following book gives a research informed, yet accessible overview of how to motivate learners in the language classroom:

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

These three books are practical 'recipe book' style publications that offer ideas and activities for creating learner-centred or learner-generated content:

Meddings, L. & Thornbury, S. (2009). *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching.* Peaslake, UK: Delta Publishing.

Campbell, C. & Kryszewska, H. (1992). *Learner-based teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deller, S. (1990). *Lessons from the Learner: Student-generated activities for the language classroom.* Canterbury: Longman.

The last two chapters of Dörnyei, Henry & Muir (2016) offer a practical discussion about how projects might be structured and managed, set out around seven project frameworks that learner-centred content might be built around. Patton (2012) provides a very practical introduction to projects in educational contexts more generally. (Although projects might not be an appropriate methodology in some classrooms, many of the same principles apply to learner-centred content and in this respect this literature is a valuable resource):

Dörnyei, Z., Henry, A., & Muir, C. (2016). *Motivational currents in language learning: Frameworks for focused interventions.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Patton, A. (2012). *Work that matters: The teacher's guide to project-based learning.* London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

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