

An Exploration of Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training Institute English Teachers' Views and Classroom Application of Student-Centered Learning Principles

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions and practices of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training Institute English teachers regarding student-centered learning. Interviews, focus group discussion and classroom observations revealed that while teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards student-centered approaches, their actual classroom practices often remain teacher-centered, heavily relying on textbooks and overlooking trainees' interests. The study identified several challenges, including a lack of practical skills for implementing student-centered methods, the constraints of summative assessments, and the need for continuous formative feedback. Addressing the gap between theory and practice will require professional development that integrates practical experience and the implementation of flexible policies that support teacher autonomy and curricula tailored to trainees' needs. These findings provide valuable insights into the contextual challenges faced by educators and suggest ways to better align teaching practices with the evolving demands of the workforce through ongoing improvement and localized responsiveness.

Keywords: student-centered, teacher-centered, formative assessment, summative assessment, trainee

1. Introduction

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training (FTVT) Institute, formerly known as Ethio-China Polytechnic College, provided training programs in levels one to five from 2005-2010. In 2011, it became one of the higher institutions of the country. The Institute offers three English courses in the first three consecutive semesters.

According to Weimer (2002), the roles of both the teacher and students must shift from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side," with the instructor guiding students on their academic developmental journey rather than simply imparting knowledge. Gonzales et al (2001) define student-centered teaching and learning as methods that help students develop

the attitude, resourcefulness, and skills needed to become lifelong, strategic, and motivated learners. In student-centered classrooms, the teacher's role is to inspire learners to engage in discovery learning and to learn from one another. Their focus is on creating authentic, real-world activities that encourage student participation and engagement.

Assessment is a crucial aspect of the student-centered approach, and there have been numerous suggestions on how to enhance this area. According to Randall and Zundel (2012), assessment encompasses more than just grading. It involves defining observable criteria, observing performance, making judgments, providing feedback to students, and offering guidance on improvement. Therefore, its purpose is not solely to score student papers but to foster learning. As noted by Weimer (2002), self-assessment and peer assessment are integral components of the evaluation process, enabling students to assess their own work and that of their peers in a constructive manner by posing critical questions. Through collaboration between instructors and students, criteria for evaluation are established, enhancing students' awareness of the expectations placed upon them.

However, all of the English instructors have reported that their trainees struggle with the language, as seen in their low scores on mid-term and final exams. Additionally, an assessment of graduates' performance also showed a weakness in English proficiency. This may be due to English teachers not empowering trainees to take charge of their own learning and personal development, which is a key aspect of the student-centered approach. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether teachers provide opportunities for trainees to practice the language and use assessment methods that promote learning. This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the learner-centered approach used in English language classrooms and identify potential techniques for future use. It aims to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices of learner-centered methods in English language teaching. The following research questions will guide this study:

- a. What perception do teachers have about student-centered learning?
- b. How do teachers implement student-centered learning method?
- c. What assessment techniques do teachers use?

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored educators' perspectives on learner-centered approaches in different contexts, providing valuable situational insights. For instance, Tadesse et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research with Eritrean primary and secondary teachers through interviews and focus groups. Similarly, Colbert and Arboleda (2016) administered surveys, conducted focus groups, and collected reflections from over 1500 Colombian educators as part of a large-scale reform initiative.

Both studies identified educators' commitment to pedagogical change while also surfacing practical barriers. In Eritrea, teachers voiced challenges such as large class sizes averaging 50 students, shortage of materials and textbooks, and lack of ongoing training opportunities during and after the initial pre-service phase. Colombian instructors likewise struggled with class sizes exceeding 40 learners on average, though they benefited from the project's comprehensive multi-year training program incorporating workshops, seminars, and mentoring supports.

However, the Colombian case offers insights into undertaking nationwide educational transformations at scale. Over 5000 schools representing all regions were included, impacting 55,000 educators and their practices. Supports addressed capacity-building as well as resistance to change among entrenched instructors. Both studies highlight the value of contextualized research for understanding location-specific obstacles from the viewpoints of those implementing reforms.

This contrasts with literature focusing on theoretical frameworks. For instance, Woolfolk, et al. (2008) and Saville-Troike and Barto (2017) put forth concepts of student-centered learning without examining real-world conditions. Ngwira (2023) administered surveys to 300 Malawian teachers, providing empirical confirmation of their alignment with principles like engaged participation, yet constraints like large classes inhibiting innovations.

Quantitative studies lend evidentiary support, such as Sharma, et al (2021) demonstrating blended tasks enhanced Indian students' conceptual science comprehension compared to lectures. Effect sizes were reported from pre- versus post-testing 180 tenth graders, substantiating positive outcomes.

Randle (1997) and Cerda and Williams (2012) advocate for project-based learning and task-based instruction, respectively, both of which aim to integrate multiple subject areas and authentic tasks into interconnected, socially meaningful themes. These approaches promote the application of knowledge to solve real-world issues and enhance comprehension through experiential completion of open-ended problems. Bada's (2015) research in Nigeria supports the effectiveness of project-based learning activities in improving academic achievement among secondary students, highlighting the approach's ability to foster autonomous learning and problem-solving skills.

Guest (2005) conducted a study on blended and online learning models and found that schools combining technology-supported independent study with face-to-face teaching achieved higher levels of achievement. This indicates the benefits of adaptive approaches when paired with direct instruction, suggesting that a combination of instructional techniques can lead to improved learning outcomes.

Various scholars also shed light on the challenges faced by teachers in transitioning to learner-centered roles. Fraschini and Park (2022) interviewed Korean secondary instructors who expressed enthusiasm for paradigm shifts but also voiced concerns about personal competency and increased workload. Aris (2020) conducted in-depth interviews with Malaysian teachers, identifying uncertainties in transitioning identities from knowledge-transmitters to learning facilitators. To address these challenges, West et al. (2018) propose the use of professional learning communities, which offer ongoing collaboration and support for teachers in navigating the transition process. Jones (2007) provides a learner-centered framework for lesson planning, emphasizing essential questions, real-world problem-solving, flexible groupings, peer teaching, and student choice and voice.

Moreover, Wang (2014) highlights the pressure teachers face in Chinese schools to prepare students for competitive exams, which often prioritizes exam-centered evaluation over ongoing feedback. In contrast, Sandvik and Emstad (2019) found that supplementing traditional scoring with formative assessments enhanced Norwegian students' sense of

responsibility and ownership of their progress. This suggests that a balance between accountability and tailored support through blended assessment formats can be beneficial. Ellery (2008) conducted a case study on ongoing feedback mechanisms, demonstrating that formative practices significantly enhance summative achievement when systematically integrated.

The importance of understanding local realities and contexts when implementing learner-centered education is also highlighted. Assefa (2017) conducted interviews with Ethiopian teachers, revealing the significance of incorporating sociocultural values and adaptable solutions that are sensitive to the local context. Hawa et al. (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study at Egyptian universities, identifying challenges specific to performance conditions and proposing targeted capacity-building initiatives. These contextualized investigations offer nuanced guidance in addressing challenges and tailoring educational approaches to specific contexts.

Mengistu et al. (2023) explored the perceptions and use of lesson study among primary school English teachers in Ethiopia, finding that collaborative lesson design through reflective practice improved student-centered instruction. Abiche et al. (2018) administered questionnaires to Grade 10 English students in Ethiopia, identifying various barriers such as lack of training, large class sizes, curriculum demands prioritizing coverage over skills development, and limited resources. Shah (2020) outlined barriers at institutional and classroom levels in developing countries, including inadequate facilities, teacher-centered tendencies, and large class sizes that inhibit curriculum innovation. Overcoming these systemic constraints is crucial for successful reforms.

Geressu & Ababa (2008) revealed the challenges faced by Ethiopian university instructors in applying learner-centered practices. These challenges include prescriptive evaluation frameworks, theoretical knowledge gaps, and inadequate guidance on practical implementation.

Ang et al. (2001) and Gonzales et al. (2001) conducted comprehensive studies in the Philippines, identifying core principles of student-centered education, including equitable participation through inclusive strategies, emphasizing students' experiences and prior knowledge, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and promoting active engagement and collaboration among students.

Brown (2008) conducted empirical research in music classrooms, demonstrating the positive outcomes of learner-centered approaches. Choice-based activities, self-assessment, and peer teaching were found to enhance student motivation, engagement, and academic performance.

To summarize, the literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of learner-centered education and its implementation. It highlights the effectiveness of project-based, inquiry-based, and blended learning approaches in improving academic achievement and conceptual understanding. The review also emphasizes the challenges faced by teachers in transitioning to learner-centered roles and the need for support through professional learning communities. The impact of standardized testing on formative assessment practices is discussed, along with the importance of contextualized investigations and overcoming

systemic constraints. Theoretical frameworks and core principles of learner-centered education are presented, and empirical research demonstrates the positive outcomes of student choice, self-assessment, and collaborative activities. Overall, the literature review provides a rich understanding of learner-centered education and offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to implement student-centered approaches in diverse educational settings.

3. Methods

The study was conducted within the qualitative research paradigm, adopting interpretivism as the chosen epistemological position. Phenomenology was employed as the research design within the framework of interpretivism. The phenomenological research design focuses on comprehending the social world by examining how participants interpret and make sense of their experiences within it.

3.1. Data Gathering Instruments

To gather data, a semi-structured interview was employed, allowing the researcher to directly interview participants and record their views, beliefs, and practices. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) involving five English instructors was conducted to further explore the topic. Another data collection method utilized was observation. An observation checklist was prepared, focusing on the four themes addressed during the focus group discussion. The observer recorded observations by jotting down relevant points in the blank space provided under each theme during the observation process.

3.2. Participants

The study group consisted of eight English teachers who had experience in teaching English language in higher institutions. More specifically, these interviewees were affiliated with FTVT Institute. The purpose of the interviews was to gather insights on their perspectives and experiences with student-centered learning. Additionally, the focus group discussion (FGD) involved five English instructors from FTVT Institute, with three of them teaching Communicative English Skills I and Communicative English Skills II, and the other two were teaching the Writing Skills course. As for the observation phase, two classes from FTVT Institute were selected for this purpose, with each class being observed once.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analyzed using MAXQDA 24 software. The transcripts were categorized and coded based on the most frequent patterns observed in the data. The main ideas conveyed in each message were then analyzed to identify the specific aspects of student-centered methodology emphasized. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the data underwent a peer debriefing process. The participants in the study were assigned codes as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 and T8 for identification purposes. The data from the focus group discussion (FGD) were also analyzed using MAXQDA 24 software. The analysis process involved initial coding, selective coding, and substantiate coding. The outcomes of each step were presented in a tree view format to facilitate analysis. The data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were synthesized to address the research questions at hand. It should be noted that observations were not recorded using

audio or video devices to avoid creating artificial behavior or making participants feel too reserved. Additionally, some teachers expressed their unwillingness to have their lessons recorded.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted with utmost respect for the rights and dignity of the participants. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, methodology, and potential risks and benefits of the study. They provided written consent before participating in the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence.

4. Results

This section will present the key findings from the data analysis and relate these to the research literature. The results are organized according to the main themes that emerged from the questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussion, and classroom observations. The first sub-section discusses teachers' perceptions of student-centered learning in relation to its perceived benefits. The implementation challenges encountered in actual practice are then examined. This is followed by an analysis of the assessment approaches used and the limitations thereof. The implications of the findings for both theory and practice are then discussed. In particular, the tensions between conceptual understanding and operational capability will be explored. Systemic barriers impacting full realization of student-centered principles are also addressed. Finally, the ways in which this study contributes novel insights into the Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training Institute context, while resonating with international research, will be considered. Limitations prompting areas for future investigations are acknowledged. Throughout this section, direct quotes from the data collected are presented to support interpretations. The overarching aim is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data by linking emergent themes to the existing body of literature. Both corroborating and divergent perspectives are highlighted to present a balanced discussion of the key issues.

4.1. Benefits of Student-Centered Learning

The data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were synthesized to address the research questions at hand.

It could be noted that sharing experiences with peers, learning from one another, involving in discussions, and giving feedback to each other played a paramount role in learning. According to T1, a student-centered approach "benefits trainees a lot... that interests them and perhaps instead of relying heavily on the teacher, they can just do things themselves. They can manage the learning experience themselves and with limited autonomy/independence, they can even have the opportunity to use what to learn... how to learn." T2 supported this by saying that "Student-centered approach helps them (trainees) to develop their confidence; it helps them to learn the language better, makes trainees the center of the learning." He added that it helped them develop their communication skills and become autonomous learners. This sentiment is echoed by T8, who noted, "student-centered approach lets trainees do by themselves... be responsible for their own learning... learn by

their own and... make their learning easier by doing it." T4 added that student-centered learning really shifts the focus to the trainees, which is incredibly beneficial. It allows them to take ownership of their learning. Instead of waiting for the teacher to spoon-feed them information, they start to actively engage with the material themselves. They work together, learn from each other, and develop skills that they might not get in a more traditional setting. When trainees are in control of their learning, they gain confidence and start to see the value in what they're doing. T3 emphasized the impact on independence, saying that student-centered learning really makes a difference. It helps trainees become more independent. They don't just sit there and passively receive information. Instead, they participate in discussions, work with their peers, and take on responsibilities that prepare them for real-life situations. It encourages them to think critically and solve problems on their own. It's not just about memorizing facts anymore; it's about really understanding and applying what they've learned. T5 highlighted the engagement aspect:

Uh... I think student-centered learning is, um, really effective because, you know, it puts the student, like..., right at the heart of the whole learning process. When, uh..., trainees are given the chance to, you know, take charge of their own learning, they tend to become, um, way more engaged. They, uh, start to interact with each other more, ask more questions, and, uh, even start to see learning as, like, something that's actually relevant to their lives. It really, um..., helps them develop essential skills, you know, like communication, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Therefore, the student-centered approach helped trainees develop their communication skills, and confidence, and allowed them to make their own decisions based on discussions.

As discussed by the FGD participants, the student-centered approach was important in creating a conducive atmosphere for learning; it gave more emphasis to trainees. It was believed that trainees learned more by doing. A focus group participant said, "Since it (language) is a skill, it is like a swimming skill, which I always tell my trainees, if they want to learn how to swim, the only way, or the best way they can master the skill is just by taking off their clothes and jumping into the pool. You can't teach them by simply lecturing them on how to swim because they had to practice the skill by trying it." Trainees learned by interacting with their friends, learning from their mistakes, and learning by doing. The participants also pointed out that teachers were not only a source of knowledge but also created a conducive environment for trainees to share ideas with their friends and even with the teacher.

What the five key informants and the FGD participants said about the benefits of student-centered learning matched with what Gonzales et al. (2001) stated. They pointed out that student-centered teaching and learning methodologies helped trainees develop their attitude, resourcefulness, and the skills necessary to become lifelong, strategic, and motivated learners who are eager and able to learn outside the classroom with the ability for independent inquiry and a sense of responsibility.

Key informant T1 added that the student-centered approach was helpful not only to the trainees but also to the teachers. Teachers were not the only source of knowledge in every aspect, so they were supposed to share experiences with their trainees. The FGD participants

stated that it benefited teachers by allowing them to use a workable strategy in the classroom, decrease their load, know trainees well, and learn from trainees. However, the participants overlooked the different roles expected of the teacher: facilitator, advisor, evaluator, organizer, and director, which were totally unique from the traditional role of the teacher and difficult to make practical. It required great skill and expertise to play these different roles in a way that benefited trainees.

T1 felt that teachers were not doing things very right. Teachers had a wrong assumption that they had mastered the skills involved in using a student-centered approach. They had vague ideas about what a student-centered approach is. They might have some general ideas but lacked clear implementation of the learning technique. He suggested, "upgrading and kind of a two-day workshop training and distributing some sort of leaflets which can help us bridge the gap between the theory plus the actual classroom applications."

4.2. Teacher-centeredness

The focus group participants discussed that trainees could not effectively learn a language through a teacher-centered method. They believed that the teachers took up much of the trainees' practice time by doing most of the class tasks themselves because they thought that trainees did not have the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to their peers' learning. As Jones (2007) noted, "Being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process." Similarly, key informant T7 stated that when the teacher dominated everything in the class, the trainees were deprived of the opportunity to choose what to learn and how to learn it. The teachers should not take up much of the trainees' time that could be used to practice different skills, which could be developed through consistent application. This teacher domination resulted in poor English language communication skills among trainees. The role of the teacher should be to invite trainees to experience the world's richness, empower them to ask their own questions, and challenge them to understand the world's complexities. T2 explained, "... student-centered approach is a policy but the supervision ..., monitoring, evaluating how things are going are far away, so it is up to the teacher ... to use or not to use." He remarked that leaders of the Institute - the directors, division heads, and department heads - should supervise to check whether teachers are using a student-centered approach or not. T7 added:

Well, you see, in my experience, when the classroom is too teacher-centered, it really limits the trainees' opportunities to engage with the material. I've noticed that when I do most of the talking and guiding, the trainees tend to become passive. They don't get enough practice, which is crucial for developing their language skills. I mean, they need to be the ones actively participating, asking questions, and practicing what they've learned. If I'm doing all the work, how will they ever become confident in their language abilities? I think it's important for us as teachers to step back sometimes and let the trainees take charge of their learning process. It's not just about me imparting knowledge; it's about them discovering and applying that knowledge themselves.

T3 emphasized the need for a student-centered approach by stating that they have always believed it is key to effective language learning. He explained that when the teacher is at the center of everything, trainees often miss out on the chance to learn through interaction and collaboration. They need to be involved in discussions, group work, and problem-solving activities to truly grasp the language. According to him, it's not enough for trainees to just listen to the teacher; they have to use the language themselves. For example, instead of just explaining grammar rules, He tries to incorporate activities where trainees can practice these rules in real-life contexts. This way, they are not just memorizing information; they are using it, which, as he pointed out, helps them retain it better. T5 also reflected on the drawbacks of a teacher-centered approach:

I've seen firsthand how a teacher-centered approach can stifle student learning. When I first started teaching, I used to dominate the classroom, thinking that it was my job to provide all the answers and guide every discussion. But over time, I realized that this approach was actually hindering my trainees' ability to develop their language skills. They weren't getting enough opportunities to speak, to make mistakes, and to learn from those mistakes. Now, I make a conscious effort to create a more student-centered environment. I encourage my trainees to lead discussions, work in groups, and even take on teaching roles themselves. It's amazing to see how much more engaged they are when they feel like they have some control over their own learning.

It seemed to me that the participants underscored the importance of teachers' explanations given to the trainees. I agreed with the statements made by Ang, R. P., et al. (2001). They said that through lectures and other teaching methodologies, the teacher provides the necessary content-based learning and plays the role of facilitator. Lectures, when delivered well, were excellent tools for developing the critical thinking necessary for lifelong learning. Through class discussions, the teacher could point to further areas of interest which trainees were motivated to explore beyond the classroom, either individually or in a group, through library research or fieldwork. Outside of class, through a fuller use of the current practice of student consultation, the teacher could guide the trainees in their work and steer them in the right direction.

4.3. Activities and Strategies

Regarding the strategies and activities, the participants of the focus group discussion explained that the Communicative English Skills I (Eng 1011), Communicative English Skills I (Eng 1012), and Basic Writing Skills (Eng 2011) materials should be revised so that they would have activities that facilitated student centered learning. One of them argued that whatever the activities in the course material were, teachers had to deliver it in the way that it allowed the trainees practice more. He had cited an example of activity that he had used. He presented that there were some activities in the material which involved various practices in which trainees were requested to express their dislikes and likes. "What I meant is I told them to pair themselves and then produce their own dialogue and make a conversation and even I used it for assessment purpose. I assessed them based on that one." Brown (2008) stated that trainees are the initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge

making rather than passive ‘vessels’ who receive knowledge from expert teachers. Similarly, Cerda, Y and Williams, SA (2012) stated that both teachers and learners tend to focus on detail. It is essential to describe activities in which learners accomplish complex tasks, based on few linguistic resources, giving them a sense of achievement and an understanding of the whole. We offer a formula for such activities and invite readers to devise their own.

T2 shared his experience with adapting activities to be more student-centered, explaining that he had found it really made a difference in his classes. For example, when teaching writing, he often gave trainees a topic and then asked one student to create a topic sentence while the others came up with supporting details. Afterward, the trainees had to find the person whose topic sentence best fit their supporting details, and together they refined their paragraph. T2 noted that this approach not only encouraged collaboration but also helped trainees practice coherence and logical structuring of their ideas. He acknowledged that it was a bit more work to set up, but emphasized that the trainees were much more engaged and that they learned from each other.

In the first class that I observed, the teacher was discussing the types of sentences. Almost he had used 20 minutes for a continuous explanation of types of sentences and giving examples. Then with the remaining 30 minutes he asked them to be in group of five and work on the activity from question 1 to 8 which required them to identifying sentence types. After 20 minutes he told them to discuss it together. T5 emphasized the importance of stepping away from the textbook and incorporating materials that resonate more with the trainees’ experiences. He explained:

When it comes to teaching strategies, I think it’s crucial to step away from the textbook sometimes and bring in materials that resonate more with the trainees’ experiences. One activity I use often is having trainees describe each other using present simple and continuous tenses. They work in pairs or small groups, and one student describes another without naming them, while the rest of the group guesses who it is. This activity not only helps with grammar practice but also makes the lesson more interactive and fun. It’s all about finding ways to make the material more relevant and engaging for the trainees.

In the second class, the teacher was giving instruction to trainees to come in front and present what they had prepared themselves on. It took him only five minutes to tell them the instructions and criteria of evaluation of their presentations. Then he sat down and assessed trainees’ performance. T3 also highlighted the importance of making lessons interest-based and competitive, sharing:

I usually start by identifying what interests my trainees and then tailoring the activities to match their level and needs. One strategy I’ve used successfully is to create a competitive environment in the classroom, where I assign tasks that come with small rewards. For instance, I might ask trainees to present on a topic in groups and then give a small prize to the group that performs best. This approach not only motivates them to participate actively but also makes learning more enjoyable. It’s amazing how much more they engage when there’s a bit of friendly competition involved.

In the focus group discussion, it was said that teacher was not supposed to be text book bound. We could look for whatever materials were appropriate from different sources and freely used them in the classroom. We needed to adapt activities to get trainees actively participate. Here is an example taken from the focus group discussion. One of the participants said, "... when I teach grammar, especially present simple and present continuous tenses..... I asked one of my trainees to come out before his/her classmates and described a student without mentioning his/her name, ... he/she was asked to describe that person and the rest of the class guessed who that student was. So they could say a guy *is wearing* this jacket. He/she *is wearing* this one or that one. They use present continuous tense there. So that I just come up with activities of this kind. You can simply engage your trainees in the activity." Here is another example and procedure of doing it:

There is activity that I usually use in my class, especially in my writing class is when I teach paragraph. You know, what I usually do? I give a topic and I ask one student to write a topic sentence and the other trainees to write supportive sentences. And after they write on whatever they are given to write, I want them to find the person who has the topic sentence that can fit with their supportive details so that as they are trying to find that person they will practice the language with. And then after they meet, they can sit and re-write the paragraph together. They will think about the coherence, how coherent the paragraph is.... If he/she is really good at in approaching it in a way that trainees can easily engaged in, trainees participate actively.

T3 also highlighted the importance of making lessons interest-based and competitive, sharing that they usually start by identifying what interests their trainees and then tailoring the activities to match their level and needs. He mentioned that one strategy they had used successfully was to create a competitive environment in the classroom, where they assigned tasks that came with small rewards. For instance, T3 might ask trainees to present on a topic in groups and then give a small prize to the group that performed best. They noted that this approach not only motivated the trainees to participate actively but also made learning more enjoyable. He found it amazing how much more the trainees engaged when there was a bit of friendly competition involved.

T₁ replied that at department level, we had to adapt the material to make it suitable for student centered learning and prepared a kind of experience sharing sessions. T6 said that he first tried to identify their interest—to make the lesson interest-based. In such kind of need-based activities, he found out that his trainees eagerly participated. He directly used some of the activities that were in the textbook and by tailoring some of the activities to the need and level of his trainees. In addition to designing need-based activities, he employed different motivational mechanism; for example, he set some mark for that task that they were doing, created some competitive feeling within the group and among different groups, and gave rewards for high achieving trainees. These technics motivated learner to engage themselves in the lesson. Furthermore, he suggested that a kind of refreshment training should be given to teachers in order to help them implement student-centered method in the way it benefited the trainees much. Key informant (T₁) stated:

In my first class I do not just teach my first lesson in my first meeting with the trainees. Instead perhaps we can have a kind of introductory session where we just set a kind of framework and within this framework we tried to handle every activity...for instance, one way I do this is by just, you know, making the seat arrangements ... Sometimes trainees, you know, go to class and sit randomly here and there ... it is all messy all over the classroom ... you cannot even arrange pair discussions, group discussions. ... I just, you know, tell them what I expect from them throughout the semester.

He also explained that, the first day, he talked about how to group the trainees, how to arrange pair discussions, group discussions and whole class discussions. For instance, if there was an individual work, he made sure that they perused the activity themselves without consulting anybody else and then he asked them to share what they had done within their friends, with their immediate neighbors. The class became somehow noisy as all the trainees were absorbed in the activity given to them. He arranged individual oral presentations; he first let them practice it by presenting it to their groups and commented on one another's work which allowed them to share ideas and develop confidence.

T₁ suggested, “..... upgrading and kind of a two days' workshop training and distributing some sort of leaflets which can help us bridge the gap between the theory plus the actual classroom applications.” He added that at department level, we had to adapt the material to make it suitable for student centered learning and prepare a kind of experience sharing sessions. T₆ also suggested that a kind of refreshment training should be given to teachers in order to help them implement it the way it benefited much of the trainees.

What was stated in the focus group discussion and in the individual interviews showed that we had to make the activities interesting and appealing to the trainees. Therefore, we had to set a clear procedure how to carry out a certain task. In addition, the procedures should be in the way that gave more chance and freedom to trainees. We should be flexible, i.e, we should not always follow what was stated in the course material if it didn't help trainees practice the language. Guest (2005) noted that within flexible learning trainees may negotiate with their lecturers on matters such as choice of topic areas, use of support materials such as textbook and web resources, timetable and venues for meetings with their instructors and the nature and weighting of individual assessment tasks. Trainees have some autonomy over how, when, where and what to learn. In this way, flexible learning takes account of the individual needs of trainees and therefore implies a more 'student-centered' approach to learning.

Teachers need to be flexible in their ways of teaching to help trainees benefit the most from a given lesson. It is sound to give training and arrange language teaching workshops that can help us translate the principles of student-centered approach into practice.

4.4. Organization of Class

Regarding the organization of his class, T₄ pointed out that he made the trainees work in groups. T₆, T₇, and T₈ got trainees to actively participate in the learning process by using various modes of organization. They used individual, pairs, group, and whole class discussions. T₇ added that FTVT Institute trainees were all teachers themselves, so it was

easy to organize them in a way that was thought to be the best for learning certain language items or skills. T7 exemplified, “When you tell them that you want them to be grouped in, you know, three or four or in pairs, they agree to do.” Similarly, T2 emphasized the importance of varying the structure depending on the lesson:

Ah... you know, when it comes to organizing my class, I think it's really important to, um, vary the structure depending on the lesson. I mean, sometimes I, uh, start with individual tasks, you know, to give them a chance to, uh, work on their own and then, um, I'll transition into pair or group work. It's, you know, all about finding the right balance. Em... I try to make sure that every student is, uh, actively participating, whether it's through, um, individual work or group discussions. I think, uh, it's important that they're engaged in different ways, so I often switch between, um, whole class activities and smaller group tasks.

T8, like T1, made the trainees come to the front of the class to give oral presentations. In group work, he assigned different tasks to each member of the groups; for instance, a secretary, a chairperson, a timekeeper, and so on. As I witnessed from the first class observation, the teacher used group work to do the grammar task. Contrary to what the interviewees said, the teacher did not assign a role to each member of the groups. From the second class observation, I observed that the teacher made the trainees deliver individual oral presentations. As Jones (2007) stated, “In a student-centered class, at different times, trainees may be working alone, in pairs, or in groups.” Therefore, the possible modes of classroom organization, as practiced by the interviewees and as stated by Jones (2007), are individual, pair, and group. In addition, the interviewees stated that they employed whole class activities. T3 highlighted the need for flexibility in classroom organization, saying,:

Well, you know, organizing the class is, uh, something that I think requires a bit of, um, flexibility. I mean, you can't just stick to one method, right? Ah... what I usually do is start with, um, some individual work, just to get everyone, you know, thinking on their own. And then, em... I'll have them pair up or form small groups to, uh, discuss their ideas. This way, they, um, get to share their thoughts and, you know, learn from each other. I think it's, ah, really effective to mix things up like this because, em... it keeps the trainees engaged and makes the learning process more dynamic.

T8 replied, “Total freedom should be given to the teachers ... teachers should be given a mandate so that they can change their teaching ... in the way that can meet their trainees’ needs because it is the teachers who know their trainees by far better than others.” T5 also stressed the importance of a well-thought-out organization, stating:

Ah... I think organizing the class is, um, something that needs to be, you know, really well thought out. Em... depending on the lesson, I might start with a, um, whole class discussion to introduce the topic, and then, you know, break them up into pairs or groups for more, ah, focused activities. I mean... the goal is to get them, you know, interacting and using the language as much as possible. Sometimes, I also have them do, em... individual presentations or tasks, just to, you know, ensure that they're, ah, working on their personal skills as well. It's, um,

really about keeping the structure varied so that, ah, all trainees can engage with the material in different ways.

4.5. Mode of Assessments

In the focus group discussion, more weight was given to summative assessment, which was centrally administered. It accounted for 75% of the total assessment, with 25% being the mid exam and 50% being the final exam. This summative assessment deprived the flexibility in teaching as well as in assessment.

As revealed in the focus group discussion, the participants assessed the trainees through class activities, assignments, and quizzes. They evaluated them individually, in pairs, and in groups. They gave value to trainees' skills, confidence, grammar, spelling, and language items competencies. The trainees were also allowed to comment on one another's performance. It was checked that they were using the English language while they were doing pair and group activities. In this kind of assessment, values were given for attending class, asking questions, participating in class discussions, and their overall performances.

Regarding assessment methods, T1 replied, "I may... give trainees the chance to present at least twice a semester oral presentations. ... I use this even sometimes when I have writing assignments given to trainees. I may ask trainees to do writing assignments at home. ... I ask them to present it orally. ... When they bring a kind of copied material (aha), they don't seem to have that confidence to do the presentation." In addition to assignments, he also gave quizzes, then marked their papers and returned them, and received comments and questions to be discussed in the classroom. Besides, he asked trainees to collect paragraphs and/or essays from the internet or books, and bring these to class. Then he asked them to display the materials on the tables, and all trainees in the classroom went around to see what sample writings their friends had collected. He said with these tasks, they did quite a lot of things: "For instance, I teach them how topics are chosen by different writers, ... how those topics are narrowed down, ... how paragraphs are formatted ... and how ideas are developed." T2 similarly discussed his approach as:

Well, um, in terms of assessment, I try to, you know, incorporate a mix of methods to get a more comprehensive understanding of my trainees' abilities. Like, for example, I typically have my trainees present orally at least twice a semester. This isn't just about them standing up and speaking—it's, you know, an opportunity to see how well they understand and can communicate what they've written. If a student's work seems copied, it's, um, pretty obvious when they lack the confidence to present it. Besides the oral presentations, I also give quizzes regularly, mark their papers, and go over them in class to, you know, discuss any mistakes. One activity I find useful is having trainees collect paragraphs or essays from the internet or books, bring them to class, and then display these samples for everyone to see. It's a way to, um, discuss how different writers choose and narrow down topics, format paragraphs, and develop ideas. This not only helps them in their writing but also in, you know, understanding the assessment criteria.

T6 said he administered assessment with respect to the Institute policy that emphasized continuous assessment, mid-exam, and final exam. He assessed them by giving tasks to be

done in groups and quizzes to be done individually. T3 emphasized balancing different types of assessments within the Institute's framework, saying:

... um, in my approach to assessment, I try to, you know, adhere to the Institute's policy, which emphasizes continuous assessment, mid-exams, and final exams. But, um, within that framework, I also include a variety of tasks to engage trainees. For instance, I give them group tasks that they need to complete together, as well as individual quizzes. These methods allow me to, you know, assess their collaboration skills as well as their individual understanding. I think it's important to strike a balance between these different types of assessments so that I can, um, gauge both their collective and personal progress.

The interviewee (T5) stated that he evaluated the trainees in presentations (individual and group), quizzes done sometimes individually and sometimes in groups, and mid and final examinations. T7 added that his assessment strategy also involves a combination of different techniques:

Well, um, my assessment strategy involves a combination of different techniques. I often, you know, evaluate my trainees through individual and group presentations, which help me see how they perform both on their own and in a team setting. Quizzes are another regular feature in my classes, sometimes done individually and sometimes in groups, depending on the learning objective. And, of course, we also have the mid and final exams, which are, um, more summative, but I try to supplement those with formative assessments whenever possible. This approach helps me to, you know, continuously monitor their progress and address any issues as they arise, rather than waiting until the end of the course.

T8 remarked, "... what is good is to use formative assessment ... to just assess trainees after they complete certain types of tasks. But... we are expected to use a uniform way of assessing trainees, so we just follow what is proposed by the English department of FTVT Institute."

As stated by the interviewees and the FGD participants, most of the assessments were done by the criteria set by the Institute or the English department, in which most of the assessments were summative, depriving immediate identification of weaknesses and strengths of trainees. The participants stated that continuous assessment allowed teachers to see trainees' progress and problems, make trainees practice the English language, engage them in discussions, ensure trainees are making progress, and assess whether the objective of a language course was met. Regarding assessment, Weimer (2002) stated that self-assessment and peer assessment are major parts of the evaluation processes which enable trainees to assess their own work and that of their peers by asking critical questions in a constructive manner. However, none of the interviewees gave a chance for trainees to assess their own performance and their friends' performances. I thought it was good to incorporate what Weimer (2002) and Ellery (2008) suggested. Ellery (2008), for example, suggested that evaluation (assessment) should be flexible, contextualized, formative, discuss strengths and weaknesses, explain mistakes and give advice on how to improve, be timely, and be as specific as possible.

5. Discussion

The study's findings offer insightful information about the teaching strategies used at the Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training Institute, tailored to a particular context. A number of important conclusions both agree and disagree with the larger body of scholarship.

The teachers' enthusiastic opinions about how student-centered learning fosters confidence and communication abilities are consistent with the theoretical frameworks of works such as Woolfolk et al. (2008). Observations, however, showed that classes continued to be heavily teacher-centered with activities concentrated on textbook coverage rather than tailoring for trainees' interests. This was consistent with implementation issues that have been documented internationally (Fraschini & Park, 2022; Aris, 2020).

The obstacles that Technical and Vocational Training Institute instructors face that prevent a more comprehensive transformation also align with systemic problems that have been previously identified, such as large class sizes that make personalization difficult (Abiche et al., 2018), curriculum requirements that prioritize coverage over skill development (Shah, 2020), and inadequate training that is a major hindrance to operationalizing concepts (Geressu & Ababa, 2008). It seems essential to address these contextual hurdles with customized help.

In the meantime, rigid summative evaluations that prevent ongoing feedback run counter to formative assessment concepts that support progress tracking, which is essential for supporting personal development (Sandvik & Emstad, 2019). Careful care should be given to navigating the conflicts that arise between accountability and responsiveness to localized needs warrants thoughtful consideration.

Notably, discrepancies between instructors' applied skills and the benefits of student-centered principles were seen to exist, reflecting difficulties in implementing these concepts in practice settings that were found to exist more generally (Assefa, 2017). By sharing experiential solutions, place-based professional learning communities could aid in bridging these gaps (Mengistu et al., 2023).

All things considered, this study offered a compelling case study that showed both convergences and divergences while advancing educational reforms in different contexts. Sufficient investigation into contextual interventions has the potential to improve resources that fairly prepare Technical and Vocational Training Institute graduates for multilingualism.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated English teachers' perceptions and implementation of student-centered learning methods at an Ethiopian Technical and Vocational Training Institute. Data was collected through interviews, a focus group, and classroom observations to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

The results indicated that while teachers positively viewed student-centered approaches in theory for developing language skills, their classroom practices remained predominantly teacher-centered. Activities focused more on textbooks than individualizing for student needs and interests. Implementation challenges arose due to a lack of experience operationalizing concepts into practical, experiential tasks tailored to the local context. Strict summative assessments also inhibited continuous formative feedback seen as important for targeted skill-building.

A key finding was the disparity between conceptual endorsement and applied capability. Teachers require practical professional development to bridge this gap through demonstration of concrete classroom techniques. Systemic barriers like standardized curriculum constraints on teacher autonomy must also be addressed to actualize student-centered principles.

The study provided novel insights into pedagogical realities within Ethiopia's industrial sector while aligning with international literature. Recommendations call for adapting learner-responsive approaches through flexible, recursive curriculum enhancement informed by contextualized data over time. Addressing identified gaps could optimize language preparation equipping graduates for career success amid workforce dynamism.

Future research assessing impactful interventions holds potential to spur ongoing progress. Overall, this exploratory study generated meaningful implications for refining support to diverse non-native learners globally in a manner aligned with evolving developmental needs. With continual improvement guided by localized evidence, technical education programs can better serve communities through multilingual capacity building.

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Conflicts of Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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